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EVERY STORY AN ACE

WESTERN ACES

MARCH

THE OUTLAW MAKER
Gripping Novelet
By JOE ARCHIBALD

And OTHER WESTERN ACES

HELL'S RECRUIT
"Kid Calvert" Novel
By PHIL RICHARDS

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Inside front cover

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WESTERN ACES

A. A. WYN
Editor

HARRY WIDMER
Associate Editor

Vol. II | MARCH, 1935 | No. 1

EVERY STORY AN ACE!

TRIGGER MAN TODD (Novel) . . . . . **T. W. Ford** 12

The little Todd jasper came out of a withering bullet baptism with three of Fate's ironical jests: A black bow tie that marked him from other men, a bitter lesson in man-values—and a big six-gun that he didn't know how to use.

THE BLACK THUNDERBOLT ("Preacher Devlin" Novelette) **L. L. Foreman** 49

"Preacher" Devlin outbidded a spic bandido for beautiful Vera Tenary. He had two thousand dollars tied up in the deal—and he meant to make a profit on a bitter bullet bargain.

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Eagle Hawn, ace bank robber, stacked guts and guns against the law, Kid Calvert's gunhawk Horde, and Blade Morales' kill-crazy Paisano crew. He diced with love, hate, and death—while hell welcomed its newest recruit.

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THE OUTLAW MAKER (Novelette) . . . . . **Joe Archibald** 99

Klug, outlaw gunhog of the Southwest, had a knack for turning defeat into success. And he worked that knack on Dan Bartel—which was bad news for somebody.

THE WRANGLER'S WIKIUP . . . . . **Socrates Hicks** 120

Drop in an' meet up with the folks.

Cover by Rafael M. DeSoto

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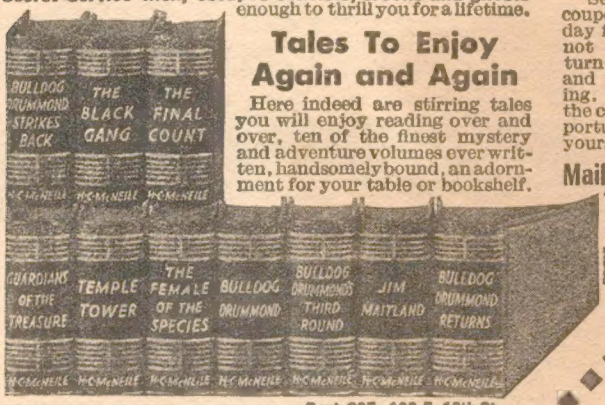

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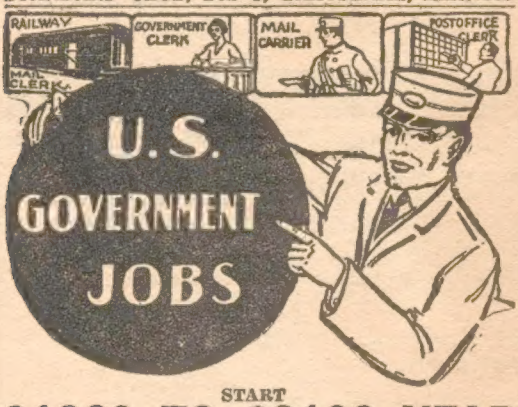

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Trigger Man Todd

He was a little jasper, that imitation jewelry drummer named Todd. He wanted only peace and the chance to eke out a living so he could send for his girl back home. But Fate dealt him a hand of blood-red cards and scorched his soul with harsh, range-country injustice. The little Todd man came out of that withering bullet baptism with three of Fate's ironical jests: A black bow tie that marked him from other men, a bitter lesson in man-values—and a big six-gun that he didn't know how to use.

Smashing Gun Ace Novel

By T. W. FORD

Author of "Gallows Ghost."

"Somebody had to be hung," murmured little Todd.

CHAPTER I

THE CORPSE COACH

NO man could ever have imagined him a snaky-eyed, stalking wolf of a hot-gunned killer. Nor was he ever due to be one. But before the results of that sultry night were totalled for the last time, such hombres would skulk back down the out-trails at his approach. Tromping, brutal-lipped, sudden-draw gents; they'd go down before him in violence. For that thing called Doom or Fate, those things men do to each other, were to leave their mark on Horatio Todd before the sun rose again.

He stood down at one end of the bar, a mild, nervous-eyed man, bird-like. No-

body paid any attention to him as he sipped his beer. Meekness was stamped on him. He had on a shabby black derby and a gray coat with an imitation velvet collar. The coat came almost to his narrow-trousered knees. He was small and spindle-shanked, feet in gray spats so tiny they were absurd. His hands were tiny, too. One of them fidgeted with the imitation gold watch chain under his coat, then with the store bow tie of black hooked under his celluloid collar.

Altogether he was negligible, a little pitiful, standing ignored in the crowded saloon with his cheap beer and his traveling case of fake jewelry. He was a drummer for a Dallas mail order house.

Big, raw-boned and roaring-voiced hombres of the range country drank and guffawed and pushed around him. There was the clatter of glasses, the rank odor of raw whisky, the monotonous tones of the gambler in the rear calling the turn on three-card monte.

Somebody, halfway down the bar, snarled: "Hell!" Then talked quickly and bluntly of God and the damned. There was the smash of a hand on a face, the abrupt breaking off of other voices.

"Fill your hand—if yuh crave lead!" a man said cold-toned.

There was the quick clatter of gunfire, one piece of lead knocking a plaster chink from the sagging ceiling. Howling as he gripped a bullet-seared gunhand, a burly, red-faced gent came weaving drunkenly back along the bar. He threshed into the diminutive drummer, swore some more, pushed him in the face, sneered at his bow tie, went on out the back.

The gap in the crowd along the bar closed up. The talk and the raucous laughter went on again. The fat man with one ear began pounding the brassy piano.

Horatio Todd straightened his derby and pushed uncut hair back behind his ears. When he looked down at one of his feet, his little, pinched face grimaced. A spur had gashed the dusty patent-leather shoe, torn the frayed spat. He looked up as he felt his elbow jogged by the barkeep's rag.

"What's yours?"

"That fella spilled my beer," Horatio Todd said in a small voice.

"He did, huh? Ain't that too bad!"

Todd looked at the barman, felt in his pocket. There were too few coins there. He picked up his showcase and worked down toward the door. It was hot and stuffy in the bar. But it was raining outside. And the stage for Tucla hadn't gotten in yet.

"Hey, drummer!" A tall, bald breed reeled out from the bar. "Yuh goin' tuh sell me that ring?"

"I told you my price," Horatio Todd began. "And—"

"I tol' yuh thet Mex girl uh mine'd like it!"

"Sure. I understand. But I can't let it go any cheaper. That's five dollars below the price in the book and—"

The breed's eyes seemed to stare right through the drummer. They were lidless. He was a hairless, unhealthy-looking gent, anyway.

"You're takin' thet stage?"

"Yes," said Todd, fixing his snap bow tie nervously.

The breed kept on looking through him. After a while, he turned away and went back to the bar. Horatio Todd went out and turned up his coat collar and stood in the rain. It began to blow, the wind whistling down from the canyon in the west. Slow drops wormed down inside Todd's coat, trickled inch by inch along his spine. He shivered and gripped his show case a little tighter.

If he didn't sell something in Tucla. . . .

The old Concord stage came in, careening through the puddles of the cowtown street, drawing up before the saloon. Climbing down like a drowned rat, the mule-skinner went to the barroom door and sang out. Somebody told him to come in and have a thawing-out one. Todd twisted at the stiff handle of the stage door, got it open, climbed in apologetically. After a long time, figures pushed out the batwings into the streaking rain and barged into the coach.

HORATIO TODD was crowded into a corner. A carpet bag was unceremoniously dumped across his legs. A man pulled off his sombrero. And water flew all around the interior. There was a sing-song cry from the mule-skinner on his box, the crack of his snake whip above the patter of rain on the roof. Then they were rumbling down the road, up the hill, with the creak of axles, the reek of whisky breaths, and a little forgotten gent in the corner.

"Fust time I ever quit a game beaten," the gambling man told the coach. "Fust time. If I didn't have tuh git on down tuh Tucla for a big game—"

Two of the others began singing, different songs. Cacti stalks, glistening, metallic, menacing shadows passed along the roadside. Todd dozed off. Once he woke up halfway.

"If I didn't have tuh git on down tuh Tucla," the gambling man was saying again.

Todd made certain his sample case was firmly tucked between his thin, boyish legs, then dozed some more.

A man was bawling like mad right in his ear. There was the odor of gunpowder close by. Horatio Todd grabbed for his derby and traveling case, made out the black glitter of a gun barrel half a foot from his nose. It was in the paw of the big gambling man who was trying to shoot out the window. And Todd knew then it had been a gunshot that had wakened him.

It was a holdup.

The coach was going lickety-split down a rocky gulch, foot brakes flapping against the iron rims. The gambling man said they'd gotten the mule-skinner. Bucketing on two wheels, the stage made a precarious curve. And the upper half of the skinner's body, hanging from the box, flapped against the door. Lead rattled into the rear of the coach.

"Here they come again!" bellowed one of the others.

Todd fumbled for the pearl-handled derringer in his side pocket. It wouldn't be much good. But it'd be some help. He shook as with the ague, hugging the sample case with his legs, grabbing at one side of his derby, then the other.

A gent struggled up and over Todd to tear open the side door and hang out it for a shot. He got it—in himself. His body went swinging off the step. Todd caught a glimpse of a big masked rider on the edge of the trail, a gent who seemed hairless and lidless-eyed. Todd's derringer popped once, punily.

"That breed," he said hoarsely.

A rider was tugging at the bridles of the lead team. The stage skated and skidded to a halt. One of the passengers groaned and pushed himself forward and emptied a Colt out into the night. Yellow-red slashes bridged the black between the circling road agents and the coach.

The shooting ceased. There were voices outside. Todd saw a rider spur up toward the sagging door, then slid limply from the saddle and lay in the trail. Somebody bawled:

"Git out! An' come with your dewclaws histed!"

Horatio Todd reluctantly climbed out alone. He was the last man in the stage alive. He stood peering up at the clump of masked riders, sample case clutched against his coat, trying to keep his patent-leather shoes out of the mud.

Two men were hacking at something on the coach baggage rack. They got it down, swearing a lot. Then one rider detached himself from the others and sidled over toward the pitiful figure of the drummer.

"I ain't done nothing. I ain't got nothing," Todd wailed.

"What's in the bag?"

Horatio Todd clutched it to him harder. His teeth chattered. He didn't have anything there. Just some imitation jewelry. That was his business.

"Hand it over," the man a-horse said.

"N-no," cried Todd. He'd had to buy that sample case himself. Couldn't do business without it. The company would make him buy another one. His voice shrilled desperately in the rain. He took a step back toward the corpse-filled coach. He poked up his absurd derringer.

The rider spurred forward, swung down an arm. Horatio Todd saw it coming. The little drummer dropped his derringer; it was empty anyway. Instinctively his hand flew to his derby, pulled it off.

Gun-barrel steel cracked down over his tiny skull. He fell unconscious beside the dead road agent. The rider dropped from the saddle and kicked open the sample case. After a while, they rode away in the rain, left him lying there in his gray coat with the imitation collar and the rifled case beside him.

WHEN he woke up, his forehead was pressed against a fallen Colt in the road. Steel—cold—hard. Big, too; not tiny like that derringer. Something unconscious in Horatio Todd made him pick up the gun. Sitting there with aching head in the road, he began shining the gun with the sleeve of his coat. After a while, he spun the cartridge chamber and saw that there were three bullets in it. Horatio Todd fitted the butt into his hand, cocked the trigger.

Then, slowly, he pointed it. And he cocked an eye at the three brass-backed shells. He reached over in the dirt and picked up his derby. When he put it on, gingerly over the lump on his head, he pulled it down over one eye a little. And he looked at the three shells again. Heard himself say:

"That's good. . . . That's very good."

After a while, he stood up. It was cold and bleak with the first splotch of dawn in the sky. It had stopped raining, too. He found his price catalogue stomped under the dried mud by some pony hoof. He stood looking at it a long time. Then he put it in the inner pocket of his skimpy gray coat and buttoned up the coat. It was cold.

The cold seemed to get inside him even more when he found the sample case. It was empty like he'd known it would be. But the racks had been torn out by the road agents in their hurry. He put the Colt under his arm, and tried fitting some of the torn fabric back. It didn't go, very well.

His lower lip trembled. Under the thin coat, his small shoulders quivered.

"It wasn't right," he said to the newborn morning.

Back to the coach he went, walking wearily. One wheel had become mired deep in a rut, sinking during the night's rain. The still open door swung on raspy hinges in the morning breeze. Right under it lay the gambler who swung open the door trying to make a fight of it. When the wind pushed the door almost closed, Todd could see another figure.

The second time he looked, he saw the bandana mask over its face, the bald head, too. The imitation jewelry salesman stepped over closer. The masked man was bald. Just to be sure, he pulled the neckerchief down off the dead face. It came free. Quivering with righteous anger, Todd stood swearing in a quiet voice. He didn't know many oaths. It was the bald breed who'd wanted to buy one of his rings.

The longer he looked at the man, the deeper his anger grew. It was the first time he wanted to do anything to a man. And the man was beyond hurting. Suddenly Todd dropped beside him on his knees, tore at his clothes with his hands. A whisky flask fell out of a side pocket. He put it in one of the pockets in his thin gray coat. He'd have to travel on down the road. Might need it. The dead breed's windbreaker fell open. There was a shell-studded gun belt under it, an open-topped holster, a bone-handled .45. Might need that, too. Only three shells in that gun he'd tucked under his shirt. Rolling the breed over, he snaked off the gun belt.

Rising, he strapped it under the coat that came to his knees. It bagged over his scrawny belly. He started to tuck the bandana into a side pocket, stopped midway in the act.

"Turn around—slow! An' no gunplay! *S-l-o-w.*"

There was dynamite in the way that voice called "slow." Todd turned around. A bunch of horsemen had just topped the trail at the top of the gulch. The second one on the left rode with a knee

crooked over the saddle horn. At first, he looked just lazy. Then the rays of the rising sun glinted on the Winchester barrel cocked across his leg.

He spoke again: "Keep your paws hangin' loose and free, fella!"

THEY came riding on. One of them said the moment he saw that mule trot into town with a span of harness dragging after him he'd figured the stage had been held up. The others nodded, seven of them and the bitter-faced, white-haired gent who forked in the van. As they neared it, the others looked at the stage and the dead men around it. Not the white-headed hombre. He kept his eyes pinned hard on Horatio Todd.

"I'm the sheriff of Tucla. Who're you?"

"I—" Todd started.

Frozen-face thumbed a badge out on his vest. He leaned from the saddle. His eyes riveted Todd. "What're you doing here?"

"I was—"

"You're a liar. It's written on your face. Come back to rob one of your dead pardners, huh?"

"I wasn't with them — the gents who—"

The cold-faced sheriff interrupted him with another bark. Horatio Todd looked around in confusion. The posse men were moving around the stage, looking at the dead. One of them halted with arms akimbo and studied the little drummer.

"He's got the killuh sign all over him, boss. The tin-horn breed! I don't never trust a gent with fancy shoes like them!"

"A card sharp aimin' to get some of his dinero back," the sheriff pronounced judgment.

Todd got excited and waved his thin arms and yelled. He tried to tell them who he was, how he sold fancy jewelry and all. He pointed to his sample case in the dirt.

"Weren't with 'em, huh?" The posseman who didn't trust gents with fancy shoes grabbed at the coat, yanked out the neckerchief. The one that had been over the breed's face. It was still knotted to be fitted over the face. There was blood on it where it had touched the mouth, too. "Yuh wear 'em that way to blow your bugle, huh?"

Todd tried to wrench away. "I got that—"

The posseman half tore a pocket off the gray coat snagging it open. His leathery hand snatched the big bone-handled .45 from the gunbelt that had been on the breed.

"Just was totin' a little derringer, huh?" He smelled the .45, spat in disgust. The gun hadn't been cleaned since it had been fired.

It didn't take them long after that. So he was just a drummer with a line of jewelry. And his name?

"Todd!" Horatio Todd yelped it. He was in a panic now. Maybe one of them would know. Maybe someone had heard of Horatio Todd who sold imitation jewelry and always talked quiet and tried to make a man a good price.

It was sort of quiet after he said it. One of the men slapped his sombrero against his brush-scarred chap. The sheriff himself took out a black cheroot and laughed silently as he eyed it before putting it in his mouth. In one gliding motion, the posseman who didn't care none for hombres with fancy shoes slid a gun out and dented the drummer's thin coat with it.

"Maybe somebody here's heard uh Todd," the sheriff said.

"Uh-huh." The man with the gun pushed it in harder. "Clay Todd. Wanted down in the Washita country for two-three killings."

"Sure." The other man slapped his hat against his leg again. "Clay Todd. Slick talkin' hombre. An' always boasts how there ain't a stage he couldn't stick up."

"It ain't me," Todd said in a voice dull with weariness. "I'm a drummer for a jewelry house down in Dallas. You write them and—"

"Sure," said the sheriff. "Take him along, boys."

One of the men came back from along the trail and said how there was a horse with a busted leg laying up aways. And

how it looked as if he'd come down on his rider and the man had gone off on foot.

The sheriff blew smoke from his cheroot and grinned coldly and said how it was a hell of a joke, a man on foot in those wastelands. And would it take them very long to pick him up? No it wouldn't, not by a damn sight. He laughed again. And he looked down on Horatio Todd.

"Two of you boys take the yella little snake down to the jail."

So they took Horatio Todd down to the jail at Tucla and told the town they'd rounded up a gunfighter.

CHAPTER II

Death's Double-Cross

HOURS passed. He yelled downstairs and heard his voice echo hollowly in the old dobie. He kept yelling until he was hoarse. A door slammed downstairs and a drunken-voiced deputy wanted to know what in hell he wanted.

"I ain't eaten in hours," Todd told him. "I'd sure appreciate—"

"You won't for hours," the deputy called back. "I lost the key to your cell." He seemed to think that a great joke and went out laughing.

Todd felt himself go white and fingered that gun under his shirt. They'd forgotten to look for another gun. Still, it didn't do him any good. There was nobody around. He didn't know much about using one, anyway. Several times he'd thought about it coming down the trail. But he'd been afraid. The John Laws thought he was some fellow named Clay Todd who was a killer. They could put a rope around his neck. . . .

He clutched his puny body. One arm felt the whisky bottle he'd taken from the breed. He pulled it out and took a long swig. Sure. He'd get that hard-faced sheriff to write to the jewelry house down in Dallas. Ace-High Jewel Company, it was. They wouldn't mind writing a little letter. Then the company would write back.

But that took a long time. Might be too long. Might not be in time. He gripped the little bow tie in the celluloid collar and the collar seemed to get tight sudden-like. Then a lot of yelling and stomping of hoofs came up from the street. And he began to choke. The last drink had burned.

The yelling got closer. And he could hear the rattle of boots on the wooden sidewalk outside the jail. He went over to the barred window. It was too high for him to reach, much less even see out. And gray shadows were shutting out the afternoon sun. But he could hear somebody talking loud about using a rope necktie before the night was over.

Maybe they were coming for him. He got the Colt out. Feet thumped on the stairs. His own legs quivered. If he could only run. His eyes fled around the room.

High up in the back wall was a small, window-like aperture. At the bottom sill, there were rust marks telling of the steel bars that had been there once. They'd tacked an extension on the jail and there was a cell back there now. The bars weren't needed.

Quickly he scuttled over to it and reached up. But it was more than two feet beyond his finger tips. And the steps in the corridor were almost at the iron door. He turned around swiftly, pressed his narrow shoulders against the dobie wall, fixed the bow tie, and stuck the gun out in front of him.

"I won't be taken easy," he said in a breathless, little whisper. It was a promise to himself.

Then the many feet passed. The door of the cell behind clanged open. Somebody went into it. The door banged shut, key scraping in a rusty lock. The feet started back down the hall.

"Well, we got Red Durane," one man said.

"Yeah. We got him." It sounded like the deputy who didn't trust gents with fancy, shiny shoes. He laughed.

Todd took a long, slow breath They hadn't been coming for him after all. He went over in front of the front window and stood in the ebbing sunlight to try

and get warm again. Red Durane? He'd heard gents telling of him down in that last town.

They said Red Durane was plumb bad. Evil as a snake. They'd said he was bad medicine with a gun. Not so fast, maybe. But always first with his lead. Seemed like he shot when the other hombre wasn't expecting it. Maybe when he wasn't looking. Nobody ever got *him*, anyway. And there'd been lawmen on his trail a-plenty. Maybe Durane was lucky So they'd said.

The drummer listened. He heard Durane reach one end of the long cell, pivot slowly, go back to the other end, pivot slowly again. He stopped once. And there was the gurgle sound of whisky in a man's throat. Todd remembered his own whisky and took a drink. It made him cough again. He had to grab his derby. When he looked up, there was the vague outline of a shaggy head in the aperture between the two cells.

"Howdy, fella," said Red Durane.

"Howdy," said Todd.

Nothing more was said for a while. Durane seemed to be standing on something, a cot maybe, on the other side of the wall, and peering down studying the drummer. The fading sunlight was where Todd stood. It was dark now over at the other side of the cell.

Once Todd thought he caught a glimpse of whitish hair. But he must have been wrong. They called Durane "Red."

His head went away. And there was the gurgling sound again. Then the pacing. Horatio Todd waited. He wondered why they had Durane in there.

There was a lot of yelling from down where he had seen the Aces of Red barroom when they rode him in. Sounded as if they were getting plenty orey-eyed.

He heard a laugh and realized the pacing had stopped again. He looked up and could just see the vaguest shape of the head in the aperture.

"They're gitting ready to hang a fella in here."

"They are?" said Horatio Todd.

"Uh-huh. This fella wants to write a letter. But they're going to hang him." He chuckled huskily again.

Todd felt his heart go dead. Sweat crept down in cold trails from inside the derby. His celluloid collar got choking, small, still smaller.

"They say he held up the stage," Durane said from the aperture.

Horatio Todd just made a croaking sound.

Durane took it for assent. "Naw, he didn't do it," Durane said. "I did. He wants to write a letter."

His chuckle grew fainter as he got down from the aperture.

HORATIO TODD took out the Colt from under his shirt and cocked the hammer. They'd held him up and broken his sample case and thrown him into jail for an outlaw. Now they wanted to hang him. They weren't.

Slowly he moved the gun upward in the dusk of the cell. The cold steel grazed his cheek before he saw it. With a shuddering gasp, he leaped back against the dobie. Then he thought of something. It wasn't very important. But he wanted to know.

He walked over to beneath the hole in the wall.

"They going to hang you, too?"

The gurgling sound stopped on the other side of the wall, then continued again. Finally Durane's head came up to the aperture. Todd sensed it rather than felt it. Durane said something. But there was a fresh outburst from down the saloon way.

They were laughing. But it was a sad sound to Horatio Todd. The saddest sound he had ever heard. Almost the saddest, anyway. He'd heard a woman weeping once. It had been when he left a little place way down the line one night. They'd just kissed. He remembered how the hairpins had tumbled from her hair when he'd kissed her. And she had said how awkward he was, giggled a little, then kissed him herself quickly.

For a moment, Todd thought she'd come into that cell, somehow. He could

see that corn-flowered colored hair. Feel the softness of her lips on his. His throat got squeaky like the moment he promised her as soon as he made enough money he'd be back to get her.

Then Durane's husky voice shattered the whole illusion to splinters as he thickly pronounced a lot of oaths.

"You think I'm a plumb dang fool! Of course they won't hang me!"

"They won't?"

"Naw." He lifted the bottle through the aperture and tilted it to his face. "Sure. Me an' my bunch stuck up that stage. But they won't string up Durane."

Horatio Todd tried to steady his voice. There might be a way out for him, too. He asked Durane why they wouldn't.

"They wouldn't of even given me a catching if—" Durane told him there'd been a bad fight. Rain, too. Only one hombre had gotten out of the stage alive. "That gent was funny," Durane said. "When he got out he said as how he was a jewelry salesman." He chuckled deep. "But he didn't sell us no jewelry."

Getting away, his horse had slipped on the wet, stony trail in the pitch darkness and crashed down with him under it. His bunch had galloped on, unknowing, in the darkness. When he'd gotten himself extricated, his leg was pretty badly hurt. And he was alone. But he'd dragged himself across the waste country to the shack of a Mex he knew, then sent word to his band. A little after dawn, the sheriff and some of his posse had ridden in and found him.

"So they ain't a-goin' to hang me," he concluded. And he put the bottle to his face again. Then he lowered it. "But that gent what aims to write a letter—"

Some guns were shot off down by the saloon. There was more yelling.

"But if you held up the stage—" Todd blurted. He felt he had to hurry. That noise down the road said he had to.

Durane began cursing a lot. His leg hurt him something fierce, he said. And when the sheriff came up to him in the Mex shack out in the waste lands, he wanted to know where that dinero was. So they'd made a deal.

Two of the sheriff's bunch were coming in and yanking him out of that jail right after dark. The sheriff would see to it that the right deputy was standing guard below and doing a good job of sleeping. That would make everything look all right to folks. Like a jail break. Then he and the sheriff would ride out of town. "That'll be durin' the lynching party, I figure."

DEADLY cold inside, baffled, Horatio Todd stood below the hole in the wall and kept running a finger around and around the nose of the Colt. This gent had done it. He, Horatio Todd, hadn't. Yet. . . .

"I don't see," he said finally.

Durane ran a hand through his shaggy hair. "I got that money cached."

"Oh," said Todd. A man was yelling as he ran along the wooden sidewalk outside. His steps didn't seem very steady.

"It'll be out in the Barren Lands. Sabe?" Durane laughed low. "Me, I'm slick."

Todd didn't say anything. Durane peered down in the darkness. He took another drink from the bottle.

"You don't see," he protested thickly. "Me and the sheriff, we ride out. A place in the Barren Lands. She's a little dobie right in the heart of it. Jus' before you come to where the trails cross out in the middle."

Todd knew then. He remembered the place coming up the line in the stage a week back. There was a well there and they'd stopped to water the team. He began to understand. It was important. He was going to get hung. Dead Nester's Rest, the place had been called.

Durane chuckled once more. "Me, I'm slick, though. That sheriff, he won't get no dinero. He don't know where we're going. And when I take him there—he won't get no dinero, anyway."

Todd was walking around in tiny circles in the middle of his cell. Now he knew, knew everything. Still, it made no sense.

"Th-the fella what wants to write this letter—"

"Uh-huh." Durane snuffled. "They better be gettin' me out of here pronto. That lynching bunch is getting ornery out there."

Todd put his teeth together. "That fella—why do they want to hang him now?"

Durane didn't answer. He was listening to the commotion out in the road. He breathed something once about getting the double-cross.

"I'm mean as a sidewinder if they double-cross—"

Desperately Horatio Todd cut in. "That fella that wants to write the letter—he didn't hold up the stage. Why do they want to hang him now, then?"

"That little fella?" Durane laughed and the glass of the bottle grated against his teeth. He swallowed. "Because the stage was held up! They got to hang somebody, don't they?"

It was black dark and he could just see a single star out the high-up cell window. But Horatio Todd didn't know how long he'd sat there. He'd just been thinking and thinking.

He listened. There wasn't so much noise now. It was just one, big, ugly murmur coming from a lot of hombres down the road. Like they were listening to somebody telling them what to do. The door downstairs slammed. There was a bitten-off oath and a body hitting the floor.

Horatio Todd stood up quickly, tight-legged. He fixed his bow tie. From the hole in the wall came Durane's chuckle and a bottle being thrown to the floor. There were boot heels on the stairs. Todd looked down at the Colt he couldn't see in his grip. Maybe it had been a sign when he'd been left with it on the road.

There was neither meekness nor trembling about him as he dragged the old cot over under the hole in the wall. . . .

CHAPTER III

Red Durane's Deal

STEALTHILY a key scraped in the sheet iron door of Red Durane's cell. The door inched open. Two gents were hunched outside. One of them had a gun drawn. The black metal glittered faintly. And a diamond in a ring on his hand shone like a pin-point of white fire.

"That you, Durane?"

"Sure."

A form edged out. The yelling was in front of the jail now. The three of them went fast down the corridor, down the stairs, in sight of the slumped form of the deputy in the wan lamplight in the sheriff's office, one of them behind, one of them before the gent who'd come out of the cell.

"Down thisaway," said the one in front.

The door on the road thundered with beating on it. A window pane shattered and somebody's voice came in, giving orders to get the rope. The three turned down a dark hall. At the end of it, the man in the front inched open another door. He said to wait, there might be some of that bunch hanging around out back.

Faint moonlight edged in in a thin spear. And the gunman with the diamond on his shooting hand found a gun nudging his ribs. He went rigid. Durane wasn't supposed to have a gun on him. A hand pulled down commandingly on his gun barrel and he let go of the butt.

He just had time to peer down at the prisoner's face, just a split second's glimpse of a bow tie. Then Colt steel whipped down over his head and dropped him. The one at the door wheeled at the sound of the crumpling body. The same length of Colt steel clubbed across his forehead.

Setting the derby low over one eye, Horatio Todd moved across his prone form and out into the night. The Colt speared before him. Somehow, it seemed to fit his tiny hand better then. He had used it on three men that night. Red Durane lay slumped back of the door in that cell up there. The drummer looked down on it a moment. Fate had bequeathed it to him. All right. . . .

A little later, he stepped out of an alley halfway down the street. The Colt hung still in his grip beneath the gray over-

coat with the imitation velvet collar. A man came running along, weaving through the trampled ragweed of the gutter.

The Colt edged up. Todd's lips pursed some. His boyish-sized figure waited, motionless, ready. His eyes, insolent. In that moment, he ceased to be the meek drummer who'd stood at a bar the night before and complained weakly about his beer being spilled. The man went reeling on toward where the crowd milled blackly in the weird light of torches before the jail. Horatio Todd waited. He fixed the bow tie a little straighter.

The door of the jail flung wide. And a bunch came down the steps, waving drawn guns and dragging Red Durane. Durane looked stupified. He was still too stunned by Todd's gun blow to know what was happening yet.

Across the street, plastered by the mob against the building fronts, were the bewildered sheriff and a couple of his possemen. The cold face of the white-haired man mouthed once. His words were nothing in the clamor.

Horatio Todd turned and walked down to the clump of ponies at the hitchrail of the deserted saloon. Sidling out a mild-eyed dun, he clambered awkwardly into the saddle. He didn't know a heap about riding. His derby almost fell off. He got it back on and pulled his coat-tails around.

Down in front of the jail, they were hauling Red Durane down toward a barkless tree. Its branches looked like withered skeleton limbs in the torchlight. A man was driving a rearing horse beside him with a piece of rawhide over his arm.

"The stage got held up," said Horatio Todd in his thin, half-boyish voice. "Somebody had to get hung, Red Durane."

BEFORE he turned the dun, he pulled the jewelry house catalogue from the gray coat. It fell under the nervous-tromping hoofs at the hitchrail. Horatio Todd would never need that again. He had learned the ways of men.

He headed toward the nester's shack out at the cross-trails of the Barren Lands. . . .

Todd didn't know that the hang rope busted when they swung Durane up, back there behind him. That it was an ancient custom of the West that when a rope busted, a man was let go free. Nor that Durane's throat was badly sawed and he couldn't talk till almost the next morning.

But Red Durane did talk then. And he was the breed who could never sleep peacefully in his grave once he was double-crossed, until he had avenged himself.

No, Horatio Todd knew none of those things.

He forked out across the Barren Lands, stopping once at a mozo's tumble-down sod hut to barter for a few beans and some jerked beef and some canteens of water. Then he rode on again, pushing, pushing the dun horse, watching the back trail for some telltale puff of dust. He rode in all but the heat of midday, most of the night except for short spells of rest.

For two days and most of two nights he rode like that. It was in the twilight of the second day he sighted the low dobie beyond a sandy crest. Then he began working the dun far south, swinging slowly around it. In a semi-circle that curveted around in the south, he kept working, seeking to be behind the low rises and the chaparral clumps and among the sage as much as possible.

Slowly, doggedly he kept swinging around the dobie that was the lone spot of human on the landscape. The chaparral began to push out longer and longer shadows. He drew the gray coat around him. Then it was dark as suddenly as if a shade had been pulled down.

"Ain't used to riding—like this—in the open—no road." He felt his gun, lips pursing a little. "Ain't used to a lot of things. But I will be—soon."

He steered the dun to the right until he picked up the dobie again. There was a light in the squat building. Again he started to ride in that circle. The light was like an orange patch in the black curtain of the night. The patch got big-

ger and bigger as he circled closer. . . .

Inside the dobie, around the rough-hewn table on which stood the lamp, four men sat. Three of them were part of Red Durane's band. The fourth was a gambler down from Big Skull called Lucky Mike. He was lucky as all hell. He saw to that. Used to say he had second sight. A cowman from Abilene said the trouble was he had first sight—of the cards—before the other players saw them.

Lucky Mike used to laugh those things off and say as how people could have their money if they felt that way. And he'd buy drinks. Somehow, he only got shot once. There was something childish about Lucky. He'd play all night for a dobie dollar just for the fun of cheating.

One of Durane's men shoved aside his tin plate and bridged his elbows over his coffee cup. The man beside him swabbed up his dish with a chunk of bread and asked for the makings. Lucky shoved over a bag of Bull.

His plate was already aside. Cards lay out before him. Greasy. Thumbed. Nobody was playing with him. Still his round blue eyes dwelt on them with a concentrated gleam. He was like a baby with a new toy. As he seized one and shifted it over, his long, cadaverous body hunched over and his monstrous head waggled.

One of Durane's boys stood up and walked to the door. He spat and growled. "What the hell'd you come down here for anyway, Lucky?"

"Tuh find some un tuh play cards with."

Nobody spoke. One of them slopped some more of the gritty coffee in cup.

"Wanta play?" half begged Lucky. "Stud. Draw. Three er five card monte. Faro. Big casino. Cut. Plain er fancy fantan. Rummy er—"

"Shet down," said the man at the door. "You shoulda stayed up at Big Skull."

"Came tuh play cards. Who wants me tuh read their fortune?"

"Fortune be danged! You can read fortunes? Ha!"

Lucky blinked and picked up his cards. *He* thought he could read fortunes. Sure he could. That was why he was there. He'd lied to them before. There was a gent called Diamond Jay of Tucla. Wore a swell, big diamond ring. Lucky half ate his heart out every time he saw that ring. Well, he'd read the cards. And they'd said Diamond Jay'd be coming that way.

So he'd just moseyed down. Maybe Diamond would like to sit in a little card game. Lucky's hands riffled the cards feverishly as he thought of it.

The man at the door said: "Somebody's nigh. Me, I can feel it."

"You're loco. We'll know when Red an' the lawman come in."

THE man at the door kept stubbing his toe against the splintery planks. "Hell of a crazy idear, anyway! Ain't no dinero here 'cept what we got off that stage." At the thought of that, he swore some more.

"The sheriff said he'd let Red go for half the dinero," said the man with the coffee cup.

"Sure," put in the other at the table. "And Red likes his joke. Haw!"

"Joke's on us, a-squattin' out here like gophers in holes an'—"

"The cards says there's one lucky gent here'bouts tonight," Lucky Mike put in. "Don't one of yuh want your fortune told?"

The man in the doorway cursed. "Let him read yours, Ed, and shut him up!"

Ed pushed his coffee cup aside. "Go ahead."

Eagerly Lucky Mike dealt out piles of cards, had Ed cut, bade him draw three face down, slid one from the bottom of the deck himself.

"Your wish card," he chanted. "Now-w, let's see."

He started to "see" and recoiled. Ed guffawed.

"Somebody here—they's goin' tuh get shot," Lucky said.

Half jumping up, Ed slapped a red hand down to his holster. Then he started to grin. "Quit your foolin'! Why, you—"

"Shet down," commanded the gent at the door. "Somebody's out here. . . . I heard 'em."

Lucky Mike sighed. The other two drew, then shoved steel back into holster. It couldn't be nothing. The one in the door said he was going out to see, kept his hand filled, slipped away into the blackness. He bore off toward the right where he'd heard the sound in the brush.

They heard him coming back. He was walking carelessly. Nobody could have been out there. Nobody hung around the Barren Lands anyway.

"He's jumpy as all gitout," Ed said.

"Sure," the other snorted. "And Lucky said somebody was going to get shot."

The third one started to step through the doorway, pushing his gun inside his pants. "Guess there weren't nobody—" he began.

A small figure stepped around the outside of the doorway behind him and stuck a gun nose in his back.

"Get 'em high," he snapped in a thin, defiant voice.

The two of Durane's men inside jumped, chairs scraping, curled fingers diving. The little fellow stepped from behind the third with his back out the doorway then. Afterward Ed said he thought for a moment the gent had on a derby hat. But that didn't make sense. And he knew he was wrong almost right away.

The little fellow's gun crackled as if he'd been planning to shoot anyway. It was that fast. Yellowish red flame speared in the doorway, raked the room low. Ed toppled with a busted leg. The other man hoisted his hands promptly. His half-drawn weapon clattered to the board floor. Lucky Mike yelled: "Ouch!" when it hit his toe.

"Toss out the money," said the little man. "I'm in a hurry. No tricks or your pardner gets it in the back. . . . I'm not fooling."

NOBODY moved for a moment. The man in the door nodded. His partner went to a corner, lifted a loose board, and brought up a tomato can. He held it a moment. Then he sneered and tossed it at the doorway. After all, he knew how much was in it.

It rolled to the threshold. And with a swooping motion, the little fellow had it up and his gun in the other gent's back again.

"First gent what comes out—gets it. . . . Remember. You're dealing with a tough man." There was a swagger in his voice.

Then he began to glide backward into the darkness. Seconds passed. And the man who'd had his hands up in the doorway jumped inside. A bullet slugged into the door panel. They all waited. There were hoofbeats.

"Git the rat!" Ed groaned from the floor.

"Git the ponies!" one of the other partners commanded as he stepped to the Winchesters stacked in the corner.

One of them legged it around the dobie and down to the horseshed about fifty yards behind. He grabbed a kak off a peg and stepped inside. After a while he came out and dropped the saddle, walked back to the shack, swearing steadily.

"He run off our ponies," he said to the other waiting with the rifle.

They stood listening. The fleeing pony was weary. He wasn't going very fast. The gent with the rifle ran out in the road, dropped on one knee, and waited. The stars were out and a slice of moon was just beginning to mount the horizon. The Barren Lands lay bathed in a pale light.

Down where the trails crossed in the heart of the waste, there was a sandy rise. The rider crested it. And the rifle barked through the cloppity-clop of hoofs.

Horatio Todd felt the laboring dun bolt as if catapulted forward under him. He was shunted against the horn and grabbed the dun's mane. The pony stumbled a few yards, then caught itself and went on slower. They were at the crossing of the trails.

There was a wind-weathered signpost. In the starlight, Todd could see the crude

steer skull painted on it, the arrow pointing to the left. Todd twisted around and looked back down the trail. Then he turned right.

At the end of half a mile, the dun began to weave as it dragged itself at a lope. Blood was running down its withers. It went to its knees. Todd hit the trail, rolling. Quivering, the dun rose. Grimly, Todd went over and took its halter, listening for sounds of pursuit. There were none.

"I'm sorry, hoss," he said. Then his mouth drew tight. There was going to be no place in his life for softness. "Your time had to come sooner or later.

Half dragging it by the bridle, he got it off the trail and deep among the patches of sage. The dun keeled over. Todd crouched next to it, fidgeting with his bow tie, rubbing his hand up and down the Colt butt.

Time passed. The moon climbed higher. The dun's eyes got glassy and after a while, he ceased to twitch altogether. Todd heard hoofbeats up by the crossing of the trails. He shoved fresh shells in his gun and took off his derby. Then he peeked over the sage clump and saw the two from the dobie galloping down the trail.

After they'd passed, Todd put on his derby and took the tomato can out of his pocket. Prying open the lid, he shook some bills and coins out onto his palm. The roll of bills was awful slim. When he counted them, it came to seventy-eight dollars and ten cents. He stood over the stone-dead dun, not moving.

"And they were going to hang me for holding that stage up," he said after a while. "They were going to hang me. . . ."

His hand began sliding up and down the Colt butt some more. And his eyes got that be-damned, insolent look. Horatio Todd was learning, learning fast.

After a while, he tugged the saddle off the dead pony, slung it over his little shoulder, and started up the trail toward Big Skull. He was just a little fellow in a derby hat with boylike legs in narrow gray pants.

But inside Todd something was growing, growing steadily. And that something was evil.

CHAPTER IV

The Bow Fella

EIGHT days after that, he marched down the slope into Big Skull. He still had his saddle over his back. Just before he came to the first shanty, he stopped and put the saddle down and dusted off his patent-leather shoes with a sweat-soaked ball of handkerchief.

There were days behind him he never wanted to know again. And never would. Because Horatio Todd was going to be a big man. Soon. And how, he didn't much care. His hand began sliding up and down the Colt. Maybe that was the way. Anyway, the time would come when he'd have a whole string of horses, the best. When he could get a score more. Buy 'em or anyway. Not some mangy crowbait sold him by a shifty-eyed breed.

That was what had happened the second day after he'd passed the signpost with the steer skull on it. Under the bitter-eyed sun of the Barren Lands, that crowbait had lasted some forty hours. Then he'd gone on afoot, toting the kak, that impertinent look coming into his eyes every time he thought of the money in the tomato can.

He'd traveled mostly at night, shying away from the sage-fringe strip of trail in the daytime, skulking in the scant shade of some chaparral or a cacti stalk when the sun got high. The fourth night he'd come across a squatter's shack with a corral behind. There had been two cayuses in it.

Todd had looked at them a long time, thinking of the twenty dollars he'd paid for the breed's crowbait. But if you didn't pay for the horse, you couldn't get cheated. So he took one. After he'd gotten it out on the trail, he went back and woke the nester to buy some food. It was a nervy trick. But Todd was a nervy man now. He had that Colt. With it, the smallest gent could argue with the best of them. Convincingly, too.

But that pony had busted its leg in a

gopher hole the very next night. And Horatio Todd, kak on his shoulder, had plodded onto Big Skull afoot again. He liked the name of that town, Big Skull. Sounded sorta lawless. And it was over two county lines from Tucla.

That had been about all. There had been a Mex with a wagon and something wrapped in tarpaulin in the back of it. He'd been going to turn off. But Todd talked about table beef and the penalty for stealing it and rubbed his Colt butt. So the Mex drove within ten miles of Big Skull.

Thus the ex-drummer with a Colt gun came to Big Skull. He was destined to stay there.

With a final dab at his pitiful shoes, he picked up the saddle again and walked into town. Big Skull was a slam-bang, hell-roaring cowtown, sprawled across the flats.

Todd plodded by a saddle-makers, past a burnt-down place like an old tooth stub, to a spot where there were six corners. Up one way, he saw a big dirty-white two-story with swinging doors in the middle of it. He went that way. Huge red letters along the front of the first floor proclaimed it the "Golden Jubilee House."

Green bottle flies buzzed off the backs of the three-four hammerheads when he dumped his saddle over the hitchrail. Then he cocked the derby over one eye and went in.

Morning sunlight speared cruelly through rents in the sagging window blinds, ran across the spur-scarred floor in haphazard splinters of gold. Dobie-plastered white walls and a cracked ceiling added to the eye-blinding glare of the place. It was quiet as if everything had stopped, was suspended, waiting. The one thing that moved was the fly that picked its way up the cracked-faced mirror hung behind the bar.

Horatio Todd walked, kicking out his tight-trousered legs jauntily, swaggeringly, down the center of the room until he stood before the mirror. Arrogantly, he let his insolent-eyed stare drift around the quarters. At the back end of the long bar, three men stood wide-legged, the foremost gray-haired, speculatively munching a toothpick. Across the room, a dealer and a cowman with a big white John B. sat over a baize-topped table. Behind the bar, the bartender moved his rag back and forth methodically as he watched the newcomer out of one eye.

Nobody spoke. The quiet had something ghastly in it. From down the road came the twanging voice of a woman singing at her work.

Then the gray-haired gent took a step forward and spread his thick legs wider. The toothpick stopped moving in his mouth. His eyes raked Todd, finally came to rest on the bow tie.

"Seed you toted your saddle in, Bow fella. Lose your hoss—out in the Barren Lands, maybe?"

HE knew something, that gray-haired gent with the toothpick. Maybe somebody had gotten in from the dobie out in the waste land and told how they'd hit the fellow's horse with their rifle. Maybe—

Todd didn't look at the other. He looked at himself in the mirror, derby over one eye, gray coat with the fake velvet collar swinging a little at his knees. For he'd pushed one side back a little to rub his right hand up and down the Colt butt on his hip. His eyes were insolent, fresh. The man called the "Bow fella" didn't answer. He spoke to the bartender instead:

"Whisky!"

The barman's rag never hesitated in its pendulum-like mopping. His lone eye stared unblinkingly through Todd. "Let's see the color of your money."

Todd put his hand in his pocket and took out a silver dollar. He held it up. "See it?"

The bartender looked a long moment. Then he nodded, sullenly. "I do."

"Then take a good look at it!" Todd snapped in that thin, boyish voice.

The coin shot through the air, glittering a moment in the sun-shot room. It struck the bartender exactly in his one eye, fell to the bar with a clatter. The

man clapped his hand to the eye. When he took it down, he met the arrogant stare of the little fellow with the itchy gunhand.

"Whisky," said the bartender.

The room was like something waiting to take a breath. It was the card dealer who broke the tension. The cards fluttered in his excited fingers as he gathered them in, big, blue, bulging eyes fixed on the little fellow with the bow tie. In an instant, he was shuffling, cutting, dealing them out in piles, drawing three. All the while his body was rigid, head wagging. Lucky Mike was going to read that Bow fellow's fortune. Something told him he should.

Todd went over to the bar and looked back at the gray-headed man for the first time. The latter would have made three of Todd. His gun bore notches, too. But he took out his toothpick and spoke as if explaining:

"I happen to be the peace marshal of Big Skull."

Todd nodded slowly, face more impudent than ever. It was sort of funny. He was so much smaller than the peace marshal. And he looked like a boy next to him, too. But the ex-drummer had learned his lesson. When you were meek, they tried to hang you.

"And you wanted to know if I lost my horse out in the Barren Lands."

"Well, you see, we—I—got word there was trouble—"

"You sell horses?" Todd shot.

"Why—no-o," said the peace officer.

"And I don't buy 'em.' Todd picked up his drink and gulped it raw. Nor did he cough.

"Well, seein' as how, Bow fella—"

"My name's Todd."

The peace officer wetted his lips with a thick tongue. He rubbed his stubbled chin with the heel of his hand, too. "Todd the gun fighter?" He, too, had heard of that hombre from over Washita way.

Todd unhurriedly refilled his glass. "I can fight with a gun." The lips pursed.

The peace officer looked at the men on either side of him out of the corners of his eyes. He wasn't exactly dying of desire to crowd a first-rate gun ace. Specially if there was no need.

"I don't crowd no gent, Bow fella, lessen—"

"Todd!" cut in Todd.

"Well, Mistuh Bow Todd—" that "Bow" name seemed to stick like it was a trade-mark—"lessen he runs afoul of the law an' then—"

Todd poured off the second drink and set the derby a little lower over his eye. "I'm my own law."

It was quiet. And again it was the cardman, Lucky Mike, who broke it.

"Somebody's going to get shot!" he cried exultantly.

THE man beside the peace officer crackled out with a nervous laugh. Lucky Mike and his crazy reading of the cards all the time. The others began to grin some. All but the little fellow and Lucky Mike.

Their eyes locked. Lucky's monstrous head began to wag. "Me, I'm the luckiest fella in Big Skull. Ask anybody!"

"So?" said Todd.

"Yuh think yuh pack nerve. . . . Got enough tuh play 'gainst me. Name your own game. Draw, stud, three er five card monte er—"

Todd put his hand in his pocket on the fifty-odd in bills he had left. He never took his eyes off the cardman. The man seemed to be trying to sell him something. And it was more than the game. Todd went over and tossed fifty on the table.

"Name your own poison."

Lucky's eyes glittered. "Poker. Draw, Mistuh Bow Todd."

Todd nodded and pulled out a chair.

The ranchman with the white hat rose and stuck out his hand. "My name's Kapper, Mistuh Bow Todd."

Todd merely looked at the outstretched hand. "Kapper? That's all right."

Kapper's eyes glittered. He had the big spread north of the town. Gambling was his only sin; it was in his blood. He'd been losing right regular. Figured he might as well get a cut at this smart stranger.

"Mind if I sit in?"

"I'm not particular. Get some new pasteboards!" He'd heard them say that in the days when he peddled fake jewelry around the honkatonks and railroad hotels.

"Cards," Lucky yelled to the barman. He was so excited he couldn't keep his voice down. He was awful glad he'd read the stranger's fortune. Lucky Mike knew things nobody else in that room knew. Things that were going to happen. He started to shuffle.

The Big Skull peace marshal took one of his men to the side-door. Said something about going for that hombre who'd come down from Tucla a-looking for a fella with a bow tie what had held up friends of his. Then the marshal hombre came back and joined the rest around the table. It seemed every time he looked at the Bow Todd fellow, Todd's hand was hanging around his gun. Not the right time to call him yet, the marshal decided.

Then the game began. And it was the wildest, strangest game Big Skull ever saw or ever was to see. The Bow Todd gent began to lose right along. His last chip was raked in by Lucky. Todd said he wanted fifty dollars' more worth. Asked if maybe Lucky needed to see the color of his money.

Lucky looked down to the boyish hand on the gun butt and said he didn't. The stranger began to win right after that. Then he lost, lost as Kapper began beating him. Kapper took in pot after pot. Kapper's mouth watered and he kept boosting the ante. He liked winning.

There came a hand. Lucky threw down his cards. Kapper put it up ten, fifty, a hundred. One of the men behind the stranger got a quick peek at his cards and saw he was trying to draw to a bob-tail flush.

"An' up a hunderd!" Kapper was just saying.

"You mean two hundred, mister," the stranger said calm and cold.

There was a heap in the pot. A little spic swamper with quick eyes breathed "*Madre de Dios.*" Nobody heard it because Kapper was raising. The stranger fellow put out his last chip. A moment later, he was arming in the pot because he'd filled that bob-tail flush.

Kapper frothed at the mouth. Lucky hunched over the cards as he shuffled with bent head. It seemed funny Lucky couldn't trim that stranger. Lucky began to act strange himself. Almighty strange. The more the Bow fellow won, the more often Lucky would look down at one of his own fingers and grin childishly. It was like he could see something there nobody else could see. There wasn't any ring there.

The morning passed. The afternoon. The table was completely ringed in by watchers. Seldom a pot under two hundred. Just as the lights went on, the stakes hit over a thousand. Kapper took that one. But the stranger raked in more than fifteen hundred the next time.

Food was brought. Kapper had a whisky bottle put at his elbow.

"No dang dude stranger can whup me," Kapper insisted.

"I'll give you plenty of time to get convinced," the Bow fellow came back. When the others ate, he fondled that Colt. Seemed to love that gun.

By midnight, Kapper was scrawling I. O. U.'s. The house said they were good. Time passed. Nobody knew anything about it. Nobody went away or thought of sleep or anything but that game. There was just the flutter of cards, the low, sharp voices, sometimes Kapper's roar, the click of chips.

The barman growled as he clumped around on sore feet refilling the oil lamps that had burned low. He didn't bother with the third one. When he got to it, the rents in the shutters were gray, not black. Dawn had come.

CHAPTER V

The Ways of Lucky

BUT things were black for Kapper, the cowman. He had his hat on the back of his chair, his coat off, his shirt open. He was sweating like a bull.

"I got thirteen hundred head of white-

faces over on the west section. Them good 'nough security?"

The Bow gent's eyes went to Lucky. Lucky looked up from smiling at his bare finger. Nobody else saw him nod. The Bow gent did.

"Sign 'em over," he told Kapper.

It began to get hot. The sun shafts poked in the shutters, stinging sore eyes. The flies started to buzz. A man out in the street said the noon-mail was late as he came back in.

An hour later, Kapper put his hands out flat and palms down on the table and stared straight ahead at nothing out of whisky-shot eyes.

"I been a damn fool," he muttered.

Lucky kept watching the sidedoor like he expected somebody. He was rubbing that finger he'd been grinning at, now. The Bow gent just sat rubbing his gun. He looked the same as when he'd come in the morning of the day before. His derby was still on, down over one eye. The little bow tie under his chin. The thin gray coat with the imitation velvet collar still on. Stack of chips and a heap of Kapper's I. O. U.'s and a lot of papers making over about half of Kapper's place before him.

"Nice game," he said.

It hit Kapper like a lash. "I kin whup you! I kin whup you! Deal 'em again, Lucky!"

They played one hand. Kapper flung down his cards on the draw. Lucky dropped and dealt a second hand. Kapper took a long pull from the neck of his second bottle, called for three. Got them. Picked them up. The next instant, they were on the floor. And he was leaping up, purpling, gushing garbled words.

The side door opened and a man called for the marshal. It was the man the marshal had sent away. He came in with a tall, loose-built hombre and the three met at the end of the bar.

"Diamond Jay," the Big Skull marshal said to the long man, "I think your hombre's come. Come in totin' a saddle an' with no hoss."

"Yeah." Jay's mouth went brutal, stiffening, thinning.

"Fella with a bow tie."

"Yeah." His right hand dropped loose. "Where?"

"Follow me. Give me a sign if he's your man."

"Yeah."

The sheriff forced an alley through the crowd ringing the card table. The Bow gent was just rising as the half-drunk, enraged Kapper stood gibbering.

"Just a minute, Mistuh Bow Todd!"

Todd half turned and put his patent-leather shoes wide and dropped a hand to the Colt. The Colt, his new-found friend.

"Like I said before, I'm Big John, the town marshal. Yuh come outa the Barren Lands without a hoss. Now there was a holdup out there. An' they found the hoss of the man what did it—dead. Now —Diamond Jay here—"

"Hell!" the man known as Diamond Jay drawled. Jolting the lawman aside, he fronted little Todd. "There was a holdup! An' you—"

Todd stood motionless, looking nothing but impertinent. He had never seen this Diamond Jay before. He could not know there had been a fight at the dobie in the Barren Lands. That Red Durane had been forced to fog it for the Rio after wounding the Tucla sheriff. Nor that this gent, Diamond Jay, had scoured the country for him, figuring he had the money from the stage holdup.

Todd knew none of those things.

DIAMOND JAY'S hand convulsed over his tied-down gun. The diamond of a ring sparkled in the sultry, tired sunlight of the room. Then Todd half guessed. One of the men who'd let him out of Durane's cell in the Tucla jail that night—he'd worn a diamond on his hand that'd sparkled in the dark. Diamond Jay!

Before Jay could finish, Todd spoke: "There was a holdup. My horse got killed. The—"

"How?" drawled Diamond Jay. "How?"

Todd's eyes flicked to the Big Skull marshal an instant.

"The man who staged the holdup—" and there was no meekness about little Todd—"is there!" He pointed at Diamond Jay.

The Big Skull lawman gaped. Diamond yelled:

"Wh-what?"

Then he was flipping up that gun. Men fought to get out of the way. Todd's tiny left hand flew across his body and yanked the Colt. Diamond fired as his gun barrel came up. Missed. And Kapper, half-drunk, failed to get out of the way. The bullet drilled him through the chest.

Before Diamond Jay could fire again, Todd stuck his gun straight out in front of him and pulled the trigger. He didn't miss. He shot Diamond Jay right clean through the mouth and blew his brains out.

The intermixed thunder of the two guns waned slowly in the Golden Jubilee Bar. The gunsmoke drifted away, though the acrid odor of it remained in men's nostrils. Pushing through, the one-eyed bartender started to lift Kapper. Then he lowered the body gently to the floor.

"Dead, too."

The marshal, Big John, found his voice first. There was awe in his face as he looked upon the little man with the bow tie.

"That was Diamond Jay of Tucla."

Todd merely rubbed the butt of his already holstered gun. "His friends'll miss him."

"He was a mean gun-fighter."

"Ain't now." Todd poured himself a drink from the late Kapper's bottle and put it down without a shudder.

Big John swallowed. Gawd be thanked. He'd never done a smarter thing in his life than deciding not to call this gent the other morning. Gravely, pompously, the dispenser of whatever law Big Skull knew stepped over Diamond Jay's body and wrapped Todd's hand in his capacious paw.

"Mistuh Bow Todd, we're delighted to have a man like you in er community. Thet Jay gent was a mean gunman."

Bow Todd just nodded. Once, they'd tried to hang him for nothing. Now he'd killed a man. And they welcomed him. *The trigger man had been made . . . .*

As the sun was creeping down among the conifers on the ridge in the west, they toted Diamond Jay up Boot Hill and put him in six feet of shaly earth. They put Kapper in a pine box and laid him next to Jay. Somebody fashioned a crude cross and stuck it at the head of poor Kapper's grave. It said:

THE WAYS OF THE ALMIGHTY ARE POWERFUL STRANGE

People thought that was fine. They said it was a mighty pretty sentiment. And when they found it was Lucky Mike who'd made it, they thought that was stranger still. Thinking of the home-made tombstone, nobody noticed that Diamond Jay's diamond ring had been missing when they buried him.

Afterward, Bow Todd and Lucky went down to the latter's shack at the edge of Big Skull. Lucky brought out a bottle and they had some drinks in the reddish afterglow of the sunset that penetrated the patched panes of the single window.

"I sure am a lucky gent," Bow Todd remarked after the second.

"Knew that, I did," said Lucky.

"Knew?" Bow Todd put the derby a little lower over his eye.

Lucky looked down at his bare finger, felt in a vest pocket, and waggled his oversized head. "I was in the dobie in the Barren Lands that night. . . . Knew yuh right smack-dab off when yuh come intuh the Golden Jubilee."

He pretended he didn't see Bow Todd's leveled gun. He babbled on. Had known what was going to happen all the time. Read it in the cards. How Diamond Jay would come. And there'd be a gunfight. And Bow Todd would win.

Todd asked him if he'd know how he'd win at cards. And Lucky said no, he hadn't seen that. Felt in the vest pocket again.

"The ways of the Almighty are powerful strange," he said. "So are the ways of Lucky."

He came back and began to lay out cards on the soapbox that served him as a table. He made Bow Todd cut the remainder of the deck, then draw three. Afterward he took them back and turned up three others. Then sat back.

"Yuh won 'bout half the Kapper spread."

Bow Todd nodded by moving his eyes down and up.

"What yuh goin' tuh do 'bout it—the other half?"

Bow poured himself a drink, drank it, and thought.

Lucky gathered in his cards. "Go up an' see the Widow Kapper. Them cards say to."

The next morning, Bow Todd rode out to the Kapper place. He went three times more that week. She wasn't a pretty woman. But she was tall and liked to laugh and owned the K-P brand. Four weeks later, Bow Todd and she were married. People said maybe it was right seeing as how Bow had shot the man who'd killed her husband.

It wasn't long after that Lucky went up to a shack on the Kapper place to live. Said the rheumatics were getting him. Only came to town when he needed some more bottles of redeye.

FEW months later, some of the Kapper hands began drifting out. And strangers, tight-mouthed, leather-faced gents, rode into town, then up to the Kapper place. The months became a year. Seemed to be a heap of rustling around. Lot of broken fences, too. And there were bullets spent over the rights of a water hole. Bow Todd rode up and shot down a breed hand of the other outfit's dead. And there was no more argument.

People saw less and less of the Widow Kapper, now Todd's wife. Finally, none at all. Bow Todd bought up the Sunshade outfit on the north, took in the Morton boys place on the south at auction. Right after that, he ran into Big John on the main street of Big Skull and had a chat. Bow said there ought to be more law and order. Big John looked sheepish, and allowed how he was doing his best, and how those gun-grabbing gunnies Bow had run in made a heap of trouble. Bow pursed his lips and Big John broke off. Bow said what they needed was a justice of the peace to run the law and leave a marshal to enforce it.

Big John rubbed his gray hair and thought it over and wondered who they could elect to be justice. And Bow said if he was justice, he'd know who to pick for his lawman. When they held the elections, Bow Todd was picked as justice of the peace. A little while later, Big John took over the Golden Jubilee Bar and they brought in more card dealers and put on a new wing. There were shootings sometimes after gents'd protest they'd been cheated. But the shootings were always done by a deputy of the marshal. So it was all right.

Thus things went. And thus went the years. Four, five, then almost six of them.

There was only one change in Bow Todd. His hand scarcely ever came away from that gun poking butt-forward on his right hip now. Couldn't seem to leave it alone. And he bore a bullet scar up on his forearm above the wrist. Men saw it one night when he reached for his cards in a poker game. Strange thing, too. He didn't seem lucky like he'd been once with cards anymore. But he seldom played, anyway. Just drank when he came down to Big Skull.

One night, a Mex boy came riding hell-for-leather down from Todd's rancho to tell him his wife was sick bad. Bow Todd climbed his pony and hustled up the hill out of Big Skull.

She was down with pneumonia. Nobody knew just how she got it. All they could tell was that she was coming up the ranchyard one evening past the shack in which Lucky lived just as a downpour was starting. It got dark. And it rained like blazes. And nobody saw Bow Todd's wife till almost midnight. It was hard to believe she'd stay out in all that rain.

Three weeks she lay, staring up at the ceiling with hard, unmoving eyes. She only spoke to the Mex who served her.

Wouldn't say a word to Bow himself. Then she died.

They buried her on a knoll out behind the rancho. Bow shed no tears. He went back and sat in his office tucked away in a corner of the big house. And he started to think back to that night he'd climbed into the stage headed for Tucla. A lot of things had happened since then. He'd come a long way. Now he owned the Kapper spread and was the whole county. He did what he pleased. Had one of the biggest spreads in the state. A heap of money up in the state bank. And no man dared stand in his way.

There was just one thing to thank for it. Gravely he raised that Colt—the one he'd found under his forehead in the mud after the stage hold-up—to his lips and kissed it. The cold, steel barrel was sweet as a woman's lips to Bow Todd.

One of the Mex houseboys stood in the doorway. He said the dead *signora* had given something to the old woman who'd nursed her. Todd sent for her. She handed over a sealed envelope. Bow Todd looked at it.

To my daughter, Molly, when she comes of eighteen

That was all.

"Daughter?" Todd gasped. It was the first time in years anything had surprised him. This was something he hadn't planned.

"Sure," said the old hag. "Molly. Molly Linton."

"Linton?" said Todd. "She was married a—"

The old hag told him no. Linton had been the mother's maiden name. She had hated Jan Kapper and his gambling, drinking ways. So she's sent her child to her folks back east and had her raised under her own family name.

Todd sat a long time holding the envelope. His fingers toyed with the sealed flap. That was the one thing he didn't have. No daughter. No son, either. He wondered if he'd have liked having one. Had everything else. He pursed his lips and looked at the envelope some more. But he didn't open it. Slowly he shoved it in a pigeon hole of the old-fashioned roll-top desk.

The old Mex crone's eyes burned right through him. "She gets it?"

Todd hesitated. He wanted to open it. Somehow, he didn't quite dare. Not then, anyway. Maybe later. The daughter wasn't there, anyway. Somewhere in the east. Who knew?

"We'll see," he temporized.

The crone breathed a mutter of Mex. Then she vanished. Todd didn't understand much Mex. He asked the boy. The latter only shook his head, blessed himself hurriedly, and left, too. Todd's eyes went that insolent way and he reached for the envelope. Nobody could threaten to cross him, much less an old Mex hag.

CHAPTER VI

Molly Linton

THERE was the crunch of wagon wheels in the ranchyard. Todd looked out the window, fixing his bow tie. A livery stable buckboard was turning in the rancho gate. Bow recognized the man at the reins. But there was—there was a girl sitting beside him. And a trunk in the back.

Bow Todd hurried out to the door. He didn't think or wonder or anything. He just ran down the hall like a kid and got out on the big veranda and stood there flushed and half holding his breath.

The wagon pulled up. And the man helped her down. She was about fourteen or fifteen, tall for her age, slim, and strikingly dark. Two long pigtails of hair black as night hung down the back of her white, starched dress. For a moment, Bow Todd remembered that girl a long time ago, the one who'd cried and he'd never had time to go back for. Then he knew he'd never known anything prettier in his life than this child.

She came up the steps with a grave dignity, unabashed in the strange place. One of the men standing out in front of the long, low bunkhouse, watching, laughed. Her long, narrow eyes flickered that way just an instant. Slumberous fire flashed in them. Then she was stand-

ing before Bow, putting out her white hand. A hand smaller than his.

"I'm Molly. . . . I—I guess you're my father."

Slowly Bow Todd took off his sombrero. The only time he'd taken off his hat for years was when he ate or went to bed. He fidgeted with his bow tie. His hand dropped toward that Colt butt, then straightened definitely past it.

"You—you don't know my name?" he asked.

She thought a moment. She was old enough to know that the admission would hurt. Then she put her dark eyes up frankly to his and shook her slim head.

"No. They never told me—back h—east. . . . There was a letter came a little while ago. From mother. It told me to come to Big Skull and go to the K-P ranch. This is it, isn't it?" she added seriously.

Bow nodded. He looked very sad. He'd never felt happier. "This is it. . . . I'm Todd. Bow Todd, folks call me. I'm—your father."

There was a long moment. Those two, the child and the man, looked deep into each other. She took his hand gravely.

"Hello, F-father."

"Hello, Molly Todd!"

His arms went around her. And when he felt the childish arms tighten on his little back, something happened inside Bow Todd. Something that was the opposite that had happened the night he started afoot up the trail to Big Skull with a saddle and seventy-eight dollars. Something that killed what had sprung up in him that night.

Afterward, she told him there'd been shooting in front of the big bar when she got off the stage.

"I'll look into that," said Bow Todd. He meant it, too.

From that day, Bow Todd was a changed man.

He rode down to Big Skull and called Big John the marshal out in front of the Golden Jubilee. Bow said there was too much loose gunning going on and he wanted it stopped. Said it right out loud so that folks could hear him. Big John just stood scratching his now whitening hair, eyes popping. Bow started to ride out of town without even taking a drink. Halfway up the street, he wheeled his horse.

"Ain't fooling, John!"

John said, "Uh-huh," and went in and had a drink and did some talking to the inside of the glass.

After that, those leathery-faced hands with the tied-down guns began drifting away from Bow Todd's place. Things were too quiet. No action. Bow said nothing and took on a vaquero spread. Some of the Mexes even moved in their families and Bow let them put up dobies. Nobody ever heard of a man doing that. He put up a sign in the bunkhouse saying as how any man heard cursing would be docked a month's wages. And he even hinted around he liked to see his hands shaven, went so far as to shave every day himself. Took off his hat when he went in the house, too.

Todd finally brought a mealy-mouthed circuit preacher into Big Skull to stay. Womenfolks ought to have a church.

PEOPLE were still shaking their heads over that when he first appeared in town without that Colt on his hip. He and Miss Molly came down the trail, reined in before the hay-and-feed store.

Bow slid from the saddle and walked across the wooden sidewalk to the store. A man coming along stopped so short his boot slid into the mud of the gutter. Then he rubbed a hand over his eyes and stood open-mouthed. Bow went on into the store. The man blinked again, mopped his face with a red neckerchief, then turned and hustled down to the Golden Jubilee Bar.

When Bow came out of the feed store, men were lined up in front of the Golden Jubilee. Bow and Miss Molly came riding down. The hats came off. Bow talked with Big John. John hardly heard a word. He just kept staring at Bow's hip where he used to carry that beloved Colt. Didn't dare say anything about it. But after Bow left, one man said:

"Used to be in love with the dang gun."

"Uh-huh," Big John put in. "Changed it for love of a woman. Bow got done in that trade." Big John's girl had run off with a faro dealer years before.

The next time Bow came to town, they were watching. But he wore no gun. There was a worn place on the hip of his trousers where it used to hang. Sometimes, as he rode down to the prayer meeting with Miss Molly, the fingers of his right hand twitched like they missed something.

The two of them were just passing the Golden Jubilee when a man lurched out of the alley beside it. It was Sunday morning. And no drinks, by Bow's order, were supposed to be sold. But the man had evidently been calling at the Golden Jubilee's sidedoor.

Bow reined in, blue eyes getting that insolent look that spelled danger. And the drunken gent looked at him and burst into a cackle of wild laughter. Bow climbed down from the saddle. The drunkard still roared.

"Skunk!" Bow Todd spat. "Get outa this town!"

He began to walk forward. Everybody felt sorry for the poor fool laughing so. But he stopped laughing then. His bloodshot eyes ran up and down Bow Todd's frame.

"Yuh called me what?" he blurted.

"Skunk!" said Bow.

The orey-eyed gent whipped himself straight, plucked a .45 from his hip holster. He threw it up and cocked the hammer. The tables had suddenly turned. There was no man near. Bow was unarmed.

It looked as if the end had come for the reckless little Bow Todd at last. All his nerve couldn't save him now.

"Skunk, huh?" The orey hombre squinted one eye. "Then take this, yuh—"

A gun crashed. The aiming man leaped backward, gun gone. He stared at his gunhand with a bullet scar fresh and raw with blood. Then he looked out into the road where Miss Molly sat a big paint horse. A gun in her hand still smoked.

Cool, composed, she sat in the Sunday morning sunlight. There was fire in her dark eyes though as she watched the hombre who'd tried to gun her dad skulk away. As for Bow Todd himself, he looked at her with open admiration. Set his gray sombrero over one eye as if he'd done it himself. She was his daughter. He'd taught her that.

Down from the group on the hay store steps came a guffaw. "Lettin' a woman do his gunfightin' for him!"

It sounded like Big John's heavy bass. Pale, with that contemptuous air, Bow Todd crossed the street.

"You say that, John?"

Big John's jaw pushed out. "Well, she did the—"

Bow Todd's eyes stopped him. Something in them, the insolence, was like the morning Bow came into Big Skull with his kak on his back and his whole worldly stock in his pants pocket. The morning he hit the bartender in the eye with his money and demanded to know if Big John himself was selling horses.

"She did!" snapped Bow. And he had Big John's gun out of its holster.

Big John lunged forward. Without the slightest hesitation, Bow Todd spiked the big man's middle with the gun nose.

"A woman may have done my shooting for me," Todd said in that thin, boyish voice. "But I can still use a gun, Big John."

The marshal swallowed. "Sure, Bow."

"All right." Bow stuck the gun in the waistband of his own pants. "I'll give you this back when you see to it that no man in this town totes a shooting iron. It ain't fit for the Lord's Day."

Big John's jaw went slack but he nodded. The men bunched around were silent. They muttered sullenly after Bow's back as he and Miss Mollie went down to the meeting house. Bow Todd was getting soft. He was losing his nerve. Who did he think he was trying to make Big Skull an old woman's home?

"He's too good fer tuh come an' drink with us at the Golden Jubilee anymore!"

"Mebbe he's a-feared if we tote guns some'un'll get the nerve to call his some day. Sure."

"He ain't never showed he could whip yuh with a gun, John."

Big Skull's gun-marshal nodded. "Better hand 'em over to me now, though. Bow's a right excitable gent, y' know."

But he was thinking how he'd like to strike back at Bow Todd some day. He'd never forgotten how Bow had backed him down that first day he walked into Big Skull. Some day, maybe. . . . Bow never *had* beaten him with a gun. Some day, maybe. . . .

Bow went up the meeting house steps with Miss Molly. He was thinking how dangerous that gunning could be with the girl around. Had to be stopped.

"That was pretty shooting, girl," he told her.

She smiled down at him, then flushed darkly at the memory. "If he'd shot you, Dad, I—I—" She broke off, voice husky, no longer girlish.

"Don't worry. Bow Todd still rules the roost."

"You're the strongest man in the country, Dad."

He pulled himself up an inch, grinned around the eyes.

"And the handsomest," she added archly.

Bow chuckled. "Well, one of these days, you'll be leaving your old dad to get hitched with some young fellow."

The instant the words were scarcely out of his mouth, before he regretted them. He'd suddenly realized how grown up she was getting. In a few days, she'd be eighteen.

CHAPTER VII

Gun Ghost

THE services were about midway over. Bow himself had dozed off, dreaming he was back selling mail-order jewelry again when there was a shot. He hit his feet, then realized there had been several shots. A woman squealed in the seat behind. Then his name was being called.

"Bow! Bow!"

Grabbing his hat, he rushed down the aisle. There were only a few men in the church, Tom Grippen with his crutch; the others old ones. Just as Bow got to the door, there was the pounding of hoofs, another single gunshot. Then he hit the street.

A long figure dominated it. He was a tall, rangy kid, gripping a still smoking six-gun as he pivoted beside a fallen horse. Gaunt, hungry-looking, checkered shirt torn, red-splotched over one shoulder, he seemed like a cornered lone wolf. And the wolf was showing its fangs.

A bunch of men were huddled on the steps of the feed store. Two-three hats peeked cautiously from behind the swinging doors of the Golden Jubilee. Another hombre watched furtively from around a corner. And Big John himself was squeezed behind a bare-trunk tree halfway down to his marshal's office.

Nobody had a gun. They were locked up in the office by Bow Todd's own order.

The wolfish kid whipped his smoking iron around and ripped out a shot down the road. It tore through the ragweed of the gutter. And a prone man down there flattened back out of sight. A boogered-down dun stood a few yards behind where he lay.

"Bow!" yelled the fearful Big John again.

"Bow—hell!" screamed the kid in the middle of the road. And a hoarse, mocking laugh tore from him. He swept off his warped-brimmed sombrero so that it hung by its chin cord. And he threw back his carroty red head, shoved up a freckled, lean-jawed face, and laughed again.

Then he saw Bow Todd walking toward him. Bow grabbed the gun he'd taken from Big John out of his waistband.

"Drop it—an' git back!" screamed the kid.

"Put your hands up," bade little Bow icily. "Shooting isn't allowed in Big Skull!"

"Put mine up?" The kid leveled at Bow. "Put me six foot under—an' you might git 'em up, Bow fella!"

It was strange. He didn't know who Bow was. But he tacked that name on

him at sight, the way others had years back in Big Skull.

Bow kept walking right toward him. "I'm giving you a chance! Put them up and—"

"Giving me a chance?" That hoarse, mirthless laugh ripped from the kid's torn back lips again. "I'll take mine!"

Bow was calm. He just kept walking forward with that insolent air, light blue eyes impertinent, lips pursed, hat down over one eye, cocky, fresh as a youngster. They were seeing the old Bow Todd again.

He even heard the tromp of the feet as folks rushed out onto the steps of the meeting house.

"Keep back there," he called.

The kid shot. Bow's six-gun blurted flame, lead. A bullet gashed the sidewalk by his feet. He kept on walking. His own first slug had missed. Suddenly, the kid went to one knee, shot a glance toward the stranger lying back in the ragweed, then fanned his gun at Bow Todd.

Gripping it in his right, he swept the hammer with blinding rapidity with the heel of his left. The Colt barrel stabbed flame. Lead bridged the space between him and Bow. Bow stopped stock-still. He stuck that big .45 out in front of him and pulled the trigger. Just like he had the sultry afternoon when he'd gotten Diamond Jay. Simple. Definite.

The wolfish kid flopped forward on his hands. His right arm started to fold under him. Bow had gotten him clean through the shoulder. The kid put his left hand on the gun and started to force himself up. There was something terribly sad, terribly pitiful about him out there in the bright sunlight. Face blanched under the freckles—fumbling hands gray with the dust of the street.

"Drop it," commanded Bow.

The kid didn't seem to hear. He got further up, trying desperately to cock the hammer with the untrained left hand. Bow stuck the .45 out in front of him again.

"Wait, Dad!"

Molly Todd broke from the group on the meeting-house steps. She kept crying for Bow not to shoot as she ran forward, swift as a deer. Bow flashed her a glance, then measured the kid's lifting gun. If that lobo fired now with Miss Molly close—

Bow had all the nerve he'd ever had. He walked out into the middle of the road. He should have shot. But he didn't. Miss Molly had said not to. That was enough for Bow. She always got her way.

The kid was up straight. Got the hammer half cocked. Then Bow was right in front of him, shoved his gun against the kid's checkered shirt, yanked the kid's weapon from his fumbling hand.

A crooked grin creased the kid's freckled face as he stood swaying over Bow Todd. "Better not hurt me, fella. I'm the—" He fell over in the road.

MEN came running. They got the kid into the Golden Jubilee and on a table. Forced some whisky down his throat.

"He ain't hurt bad. Plugged clean through the shoulder."

"Thet younker ain't et!" said another. "Look how skinny his chest is. He went down from plain weakness!"

Big John hurried in and drew Bow aside. "Thet gent a-layin' wounded out in the gutter's a depitty U. S. marshal, Bow."

Bow got the whole story. The freckle-faced kid had been in bucking the faro game at the Golden Jubilee the night before. Went busted and sloped it out of town.

"Knowed he was a hunted hombre the minute I clapped eyes on him," Big John said.

The kid had come pounding down the trail a few minutes ago with the deputy riding his coat-tails. The deputy had dropped the kid's horse with a shot. And the kid had come out of the dust to throw down on the deputy and shoot him out of the saddle. Then Todd had been called.

"Me, I was helpless without my gun," Big John explained.

Without a word, Bow handed it over

to him. "We better turn the kid over to him."

"Thet depitty's bleedin' to death now down in the feed store."

Bow started to speak. One of Big John's men came in, panting. "There's a rider headin' down the trail now. He's a U. S. marshal lessen I'm loco. I 'member his black hat when he rode through a week back!"

"Then we turn him over to—" Bow began.

There was a commotion around the table as the freckle-faced ranny opened his eyes and lifted his head. He gave them that crooked grin and felt for his hat crumpled beneath his head, caught around his neck by the chin strap. He was trying to be unafraid, casual.

"You gents better be careful what you do to me. My father's the bigges' gent in this country!" Then he picked up the drink they'd been trying to force down his throat.

Bow walked over to him. "I'm the boss man of this piece of country. Bow Todd."

The kid eyed him sternly, then poured off the drink. He flung the glass onto the floor, shattering it.

"Here's to you, Pop!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Bow.

"My name's Todd. Ace Todd! Son of Clay Todd, gunman of the Washita! How're you, Pop?" But he pronounced that word "Pop" like an epithet.

"I'm not your father," Bow said.

"Forget me, huh? Sure. Ran away from Ma a week after I was born, didn't you? Folks 'round Washita way think you're dead. They's a gent down in the Panhandle what thinks he shot you himself. But when I was ridin' up the trail last night, I met a gent what told me all about the boss of this country."

Bow remained silent. The kid appraised him with narrowed eyes.

"You're the Todd of the Washita, ain't you?"

Big John stepped forward. Maybe this was the time to make his play. "That's what you let us think when you hit here, Bow!"

Bow hesitated. He knew that carrot-topped, freckle-faced kid wasn't his son. But. . . .

Miss Molly strode through the swinging doors of the Golden Jubilee Bar. Bow almost choked. But she walked past him and stood beside the kid. They looked at each other. Slowly, almost inch by inch, the smirk slipped from his face and he tried to stand up. One of the men had to catch him as he toppled.

"Who is he?" she asked Bow.

"Bow's own boy!" Big John burst. That would be a feather in his hat. Bow had gotten soft. And now they'd take away his son, the marshal would. For murder, too.

Molly went rigid as a poker as she turned back to the freckled kid. They didn't speak to each other. They just looked. Then she spoke to Bow. And her voice was sad, like maybe she didn't like the idea of his being Bow's son.

"We better take him off to the place quickly, Dad!"

"What? Why the U. S. marshal—"

"Is coming down the road now. He's your son, my brother. We can get him out the back."

They did. They might have known they would. A buckboard was hurried up to the bar sidedoor. The freckle-faced kid, Ace Todd, was put in it. It went out down the track behind Big Skull's shacks as the U. S. marshal forked in at the other end. One of Big John's trusted deputies handled the reins. Ace lay in the back, half smothered under a piece of tarpaulin. But his head was softly cushioned, in the lap of Miss Molly.

And that girl's heavy-lidded eyes smouldered as her hand calmly gripped a Colt. Nobody was going to stop her.

"I don't know why you're doin' this—" he started.

"Be quiet," she said sharply.

But her eyes smiled down at him. The next moment, they evaded his guiltily. And a slow, deep flush climbed her cheek. Bow saw that. He was standing in the back window of the Golden Jubilee before he went out to deal with the marshal and tell him his man had fogged it

through the town. Bow looked after the low-lying cloud of dust raised by the wagon.

Then he apparently perked up and went over to the bar. "Whisky," he said. "Want to see the color of my money?" He put his hat down low over one eye. But he didn't feel so good.

And Big John, lounging in the doorway awaiting the arrival of the marshal, did feel good. He had something on Bow Todd at last.

Bow Todd's boy had killed a marshal.

THE marshal went on down the trail. And Bow Todd rode out to his big dobie rancho. But his heart was heavy. He knew something without being told, something maybe the girl herself didn't know. Miss Molly had found a man, a man who wasn't her father, if only in name.

The Ace kid was up and eating when Bow rode in. Rather, being fed by Miss Molly. Bow forgot to take off his hat walking into the house that time. He marched straight into the dining room and studied the freckle-faced kid with his arm in a sling.

"Go to your room, Molly," Bow said curtly, never taking his eyes off the rangy kid.

Ace got up. And Molly hesitated. Bow felt like a stranger. Perhaps they hadn't been saying anything in particular. But it was the feeling in the room. They seemed to belong together—and without him. Both tall, slim, easy. Bow felt like an outsider, like the days when he was trying to sell something.

"Get out," he bit off abruptly, tensely, to the girl.

He was long to remember the toss of her dark, shining head as she left. Then he pulled out a chair and straddled it. The ranny who called himself his son regarded him with a crooked grin.

"I'm not your father," said Bow.

"Admitted you was the Todd of the Washita, didn't you?"

Bow's hand began rubbing where he'd used to tote the Colt. "Lobo, aren't you?"

Ace grinned as he rolled himself a querley. "Sure. Chip off the old block!"

Bow's face didn't stir a muscle. "An' outlaw. A wanted hombre. A killer."

"Correct on all three counts. You blazed me a pretty good trail." He blew cigarette smoke insolently.

"What were those marshals back-trailin' you for?"

"Killin'. One of your old tricks!"

Bow didn't say anything for a moment. He stood up unhurriedly. "I'll give you a horse in the morning." Then something softened him. Maybe it was what Miss Molly had done to him in the years. "Well, might wait a few days. You want to let that shoulder heal. And that marshal won't come back-tracking before then."

The kid was on his feet, too. The table lamp beyond his right hand silhouetted his profile against the end wall. Bow glanced at it. It wasn't bad, a little hawkish, the hint of a high pride in the tilt of the lean head.

"Kickin' me down the trail, eh? Not good enough for you? Clay Todd who's reformed don't want no badman son dirtyin' up—"

"I said you go. If you force me to, I'll strap on a gun and run—"

The Ace kid drew back before Bow's calm threat. "'S funny, funny," he said bitterly. "You—a killer. An' you're runnin' me out because they're after me for a killin' I never did."

Bow said nothing. The kid went on, quiet-voiced, drawing a haphazard pattern on the calico table cloth with his fork handle. "You killed plenty—in your time. Me, I ain't never killed a man yet." His hand went white-knuckled around the fork. And he made a deep, slow groove. "Yet. . . .

"Sure, I'm a lobo, an owl-hoot gent. I been ridin' with an outlaw bunch. But I never did the killin' they're after me for. And the gent that did it—is dead now himself. Died that same night of his wounds."

Bow said: "The Mex boy'll show you your bunk over in the bunkhouse. When that shoulder's healed—"

"That's right!" The kid's face blanced under the freckles. "Cain't git rid of me soon enough, eh? As if I ever had a chance, what with bein' deserted by a gun-slinging father from the start, branded as a killer's son from the first day I walked, stamped as a—"

Bow felt sorry for the kid then. He hadn't learned the ways of men yet, hadn't learned you had to be hard.

"You can stay a few days and then—"

He saw the kid wasn't looking at him. Bow followed the other's gaze out the window. Miss Molly was walking out in the ranchyard down toward the corral, plain in the light of the rising moon.

"That's why you want to hang around—"

"That's why!" the kid flung back at Bow. And his eyes met Bow's squarely. His body seemed to shed its furtive air. He was a man in that instant, mature, determined.

"You'll go soon as that shoulder lets you," Bow said.

The ranny known as Ace Todd began to nod slowly. "Sure, I see. I see. Ain't good enough, eh? 'Course, it couldn't mean anything, seein' how she's my half sister. But—"

"You'll go." Bow turned toward his office tucked in a corner of the wide-flung rancho. He was thinking it might be wise to strap on that old Colt.

Grabbing at his arm, the Ace ranny swung him around, ignored the danger signal of the insolent gleam of Bow's eyes.

"All right." His voice was slow, measured. "I'll go. I'll go. But I'll be back. Don't forget that. I'll be back—an' not alone. That bunch I was ridin' with—they're out in the Barren Lands now."

"All right. Bring 'em back. But remember—Bow Todd runs this country."

CHAPTER VIII

Bow Todd's Luck

THE next morning a man rode from Big Skull with a message from John the marshal. Big John said the U. S. agent was hanging around and Bow better come down.

An hour later, Bow climbed into the saddle and went down the trail. It was still early, the dew of the ground mist speckling the sage along the trail. Bow rode around a hummock and into the Ace kid. The kid sat motionless in his saddle, just nodding.

"Well?" demanded Bow.

"You're goin' down to town. The marshal's nigh."

"How'd you know?"

"I heard."

They both sat awkwardly.

"Goin' to turn me in?"

Bow had been wondering just that himself. Suddenly he jerked up his head, mouth pursing up with that sign of temper, decision made. He'd been a wanted gent once himself. They'd tried to put a rope around his neck. He knew what it was to be hunted, kicked around. This kid—

"No. What do you think I am?"

The red-haired kid nodded, looking off toward where the Big Bear hills chopped up into the horizon. "'S a good idea," he said slowly. "'Cause I know a gent down in the border patrol who'd give his eye teeth an' ten years' pay to know where he could lay his hands on Clay Todd of the Washita."

Turning his pony, he went back up the trail. Bow put his hat low over one eye.

"That settles it. The marshal comes back with me."

But the marshal never did. Halfway to Big Skull, Bow was overtaken by Miss Molly. She exacted a promise. As she rode away, she called over her shoulder:

"Give it to me as a present, Dad!"

And then he remembered it was her birthday. He rode on into Big Skull and found John. The U. S. marshal wasn't around yet. They waited throughout the day. Big John seemed nervous. And Bow stood at the Golden Jubilee bar and told the bartender to leave the bottle beside him.

Bow Todd felt sad, lonely, somehow abandoned. He knew the girl he called his daughter, Miss Molly, was in love

with that lobo snake. Knew she had been from the first moment when their eyes locked. Maybe it was love at sight. But it was none the less strong. Bow knew. Because he knew that girl. And for the first time since that night in the stage, he realized he loved something himself, and how much he loved it.

The afternoon wore away. The first shadows crept into the Golden Jubilee and the light shades glowed over the gambling tables. Bow emptied the bottle, then turned to Big John. The U. S. marshal hadn't showed yet.

Bow had a sudden suspicion. "What made you think he'd be in here, John?" Big John just shrugged, mumbled something about how he'd heard. Bow cut him short. "You didn't send him word that—"

"Me, I wouldn't do that, Bow! I ain't loco!"

Bow nodded and pulled down his hat. "But sometimes a gent gets ambitious. I'll be riding back."

He forced the pony all the way up to the place. Somehow, he wanted to get back in a hurry. It was her birthday. And even if that freckle-faced long-riding ranny was around—well, it was probably only an infatuation. The first new hombre she'd seen.

Sweat was pouring from the cayuse and thunder was muttering over behind the Big Bear hills when he turned in at the ranchyard gate. The setting sun was masked behind a lowering cloud. It was sultry. Storm coming.

The vaquero who took his horse at the steps kept his face averted. Bow Todd had a disquieting feeling suddenly. He hurried in, then waited. It was quiet; no lights. And no Molly to meet him. She never failed when he came back from town. His hand tightened over the package of stuff, presents, he'd brought up. He called, scarcely recognizing his own voice.

After a while, there was a rustle at his side. And the aged Mex crone who'd nursed his wife glided out of the shadows. She put something in his hand and was gone. It was an envelope.

Bow squinted at it in the shadow. "To Bow Todd," it said. That was all. It was Miss Molly's handwriting. Slowly, wonderingly, he opened it. He moved over to the door, found two sheets of paper inside. Mechanically, his eyes translated the note from the girl first.

Bow Todd,

This letter left me by my mother ought to explain everything.

His eyes closed hard then, fighting against the chill inside him. "Bow Todd," she'd written. Not "Dear Dad," or something. He read the rest.

There's nothing I can do about it. I guess nobody can do anything to you. If I were a man, I believe I'd horsewhip you before I shot you.

I'm leaving with Ace. We're going to get married. Don't try and follow. It won't do any good. I don't think you'll try, anyway. You have what you want, the ranch.

Molly.

And the signature was written with a savage swirl of the pen as if her pent-up, new-born hate had gotten the better of her at the last moment.

It was a long time before he unfolded the letter the Widow Kapper had left her daughter to be opened on her eighteenth birthday. Bow understood. Faithfully the Mex crone had gotten it from his desk and turned it over to Miss Molly. It began:

Molly, dear child:

I lay here dying. I've sent for you but I know now you'll get here too late. And there's nothing I can do. But I want you to know the truth. I just learned it myself two weeks. . . .

The pen trailed off as if the sick woman had lost her strength at that moment. Bow read on.

This man, Bow Todd, who is my husband, stole this ranch from your father, Jan Kapper, in a crooked card game. Stole half of it. Then he came up and married me to get the rest of it. He and a gambler, Lucky Mike, cheated your own father. . . .

Bow raced through the rest of it. It didn't mean anything at first. Trembling, his fingers shuffled it behind Molly's note when he finished.

"I'm leaving with Ace," Bow repeated, word by word. And a sob broke from him.

She was gone, the only thing he'd ever let himself love. . . .

BLATANTLY, as if rattling the drums of mockery at his grief, the rain pounded on the roof. Lightning whipsawed along the Big Bears. A Mex boy, shirt flung up over his head, scampered up from the corral. But Bow Todd saw nothing.

Full out into the rain, he strode. His steps took him toward the little shack crouched back of the long bunkhouse. That was where Lucky Mike, the gambler, lived. Wailing down the trail, beating against the low rancho buildings, the storm was at its height as he came upon the shack. A lamp guttered within. And the door stood open. A stride inside it, Bow halted.

Oblivious of the storm, lank body swaying and convulsing as though it were a part of it, Lucky Mike sat at the table in his tumble-down place. A bottle stood at his elbow. And his monstrosity of a head waggled as if in great glee.

Bow realized he had seen little of Mike in the last few years. Mike seldom went out of his shack except to doze in the sun at the doorway. He was always drinking. and when Bow spoke to him, he seldom received a reply. Old Mike would just stare dreamy-eyed off at nothing as if he saw something nobody else could see, as if he lived in another world. Once in a while he'd mutter that inscription he'd carved on Jan Kapper's wooden headstone: "The ways of the Almighty are powerful strange."

The rain whipped in savage gusts through the open door. But Lucky Mike paid no heed. He put his hands before him. There was a ripple sound. Then he began dealing cards around the table. Dealing to two places and himself.

Bow was about to speak. Poor, mad, old Lucky was playing poker with himself. Trying to, anyway. Then Lucky's hoarse rasp of a voice interrupted him.

"How many, Mistuh Kapper? Three?" His voice dropped to the whisper of a man talking to himself, naming his own thoughts. "He's got treys. . . . Give him a pair of jacks. . . . The Bow fella's got three aces now. . . . Kapper'll raise." The whisper was replaced by the rasp again. "How many fer yuh, Mistuh Bow fella? Two? Okay."

And he obediently slid two to the place on the table at his right hand. The place where Bow Todd himself had sat the night of the memorable game in the Golden Jubilee Bar.

Fascinated, Bow remained silent and watched. Hand after hand, the mad Lucky Mike played with himself and his two imaginary adversaries. Bow began to recognize some of those hands. Kapper had backed his full house, kings and sixes, with fifteen hundred head of whitefaces.

"'Bout here I ran in the marked deck," Lucky told himself in that sotto voce whisper. "Callin', Mistuh Bow fella. I drop." The whisper again. "Kapper's raisin' it. . . ."

Bow stood rooted another full minute.

"Kapper with four queens," Lucky muttered. "Two, Mistuh Bow Todd. . . . Got aces. . . . Two more comin' tuh him from the bottom of the deck—"

His hand flashed out with them, the cards burned from the bottom. Aces, too. Something glittered brightly in the lamplight. It was the diamond of a ring on Lucky's dealing hand.

Bow could stand it no longer. He stepped around Lucky's side.

"Lucky Mike!"

Lucky looked up. "Why Mistuh Bow Todd, yuh don't want to quit yet!"

In a burst of fury, Bow grabbed his shrunken shoulders and shook them. The cards fell from Lucky's hands. But the one-time gambler only stared down at the sparkling diamond on his hand with childish intensity. He began moving his hand just slightly so that it glittered and caught the fire of the lamplight. It was like a toy to him.

"Lucky!"

"The ways of the Almighty are powerful strange."

Bow grabbed up the whisky bottle and sloshed the tin cup beside it half full. Lucky obediently poured it down like a baby taking its milk. But the very stiffness of the jolt seemed to half waken him. Desperate, Bow swung up the bottle again and dashed its contents in Lucky's face.

Lucky neither jumped nor recoiled. He just sleeved it out of his eyes, blinked, then seemed to see Bow for the first time. His great head waggled.

"Howdy, Bow. Sit down. Play a game."

"You *been* playing, Lucky!"

Lucky looked at the three hands dealt around the table. After awhile, he nodded.

"Yeah. I get doin' that when it storms, Bow. Allus. Seems like the storm gits in me."

Then Bow Todd knew how his wife, the Widow Kapper, had learned about that card game. The night she'd been coming up the ranchyard just as a storm started—caught pneumonia after.

CHAPTER IX

Return of Red Durane

BOW'S hands shook as he poured himself a drink. "I never knew that game wasn't on the level, Lucky. . . . I never knew it wasn't just my luck."

Lucky's graying head began to waggle. "The ways of Lucky are powerful strange. The ways of Lucky—"

Bow had him by the collar, tightening it around his throat. "Why'd you do it, Lucky? Why'd you cheat so I'd win that night, Lucky?"

Lucky coughed. Bow let him go. And Lucky held up the hand with the diamond ring. "I got this. See, Bow? Ain't she purty? I got this." He said it half pleading like a child who fears a toy may be taken away from it.

"Yes, I see," said Bow. "But why?"

"Read your cards, I did, when yuh come in. 'Member my tellin' yuh? Read your cards. Sure. Them cards tol' me yuh was a-goin' tuh gun it out with Diamond Jay. Kill him, too. Then I knew I'd get the ring. Get it somehow—like I did."

"But the card game—"

"Ol' Lucky's an honest fella, Bow. Real honest! Honest as the days er long an' —the ways of Lucky are powerful—"

Bow had him by the chin. "Why did you cheat and make me a winner, Lucky?"

"Tuh pay yuh back for gettin' me the diamond ring, Bow! Sure. Lucky's honest. Lucky paid yuh back in full. Ain't she purty, though?"

In the doorway, the little man who had been Todd, Horatio Todd the imitation jewelry salesman, stood with the insolent gleam in his eyes. He was once again the drummer, railing at the Destiny that had so tricked him. Made such a pawn of him just as men had once tried to make a pawn of him on a rope's end.

"Sit down, Bow. I want tuh read yer cards again. Come an' sit down."

Bow found himself sitting across the table from the feeble-minded gambler who'd reckoned life full when he acquired a gunfighter's diamond ring. Bow didn't know why he was there. Didn't know anything.

As he shuffled and cut and recut the cards, the dreamy look was momentarily gone from Lucky Mike's eyes.

"Want tuh read yer cards—yer fortune—once more, Mistuh Bow Todd. Once more. Take three. There—"

Bow poured himself another drink from the bottle. Though he coughed, he hardly tasted it. Lucky was speaking.

"The trail's end is near, Bow Todd. The trail's end is near—"

There was nothing but the drumming beat of the rain on the tin roof and the slither of the cards as Lucky arranged fresh piles. He began laying them out, face up.

"So they went away together, your girl an' the young fella?"

Bow snapped at him like a curse. "You fool, you could have seen them go!"

Lucky's great head waggled. "I saw it in the cards."

Bow rose. Had to be going. Had to be doing something.

"They got married," Lucky said. "Yessiree, they got married, Lucky says. The cards tell me. Your preacher man down in Big Skull, he done it."

Bow's breath whistled in sharply. "Anything else? Is she all right?" After all, the half-mad Lucky Mike had been right twice before with his cards.

"Yuh want her back?" Lucky breathed.

The sweep of Bow Todd's maddened arm knocked the bottle from the table as he struck at Lucky. In a lull of the storm, the whisky made little gurgling sounds as it sucked through a crack in the floor.

"Yuh want her back," Lucky repeated. His hands fluttered feverishly as he strung out another pile. "Go—go—" His head began to rock from side to side.

"Yes?" demanded Bow hoarsely.

"Go to the cabin out at the crossing of the trails in the Barren Lands."

"What?"

"The cabin at the crossing of the trails—the cards say so—in the Barren Lands," chanted Lucky.

Out into the rain plunged Bow Todd. Lucky wasn't even aware he'd left. Down at the bunkhouse door, Bow pounded for a Mex hand to saddle up a horse for him, the toughest, fastest animal on the place.

Back in the shack, Lucky turned over another card and his head began to go again. "An' when yuh git there, yuh—"

But Bow Todd was too far away to hear. Wouldn't have cared if he had heard. All he knew was he had to save his girl from that no-good snake of a lobo with the red head.

IT was as if the whole universe had been turned back years. Back almost to the night of the holdup of the stage on the trail toward Tucla.

For Bow Todd was plodding on the trail across the Barren Lands with his kak on his shoulder again. The half-broken, powerful chestnut stallion they'd saddled for him back at his place had shied at a cacti shadow in the night. Ever a poor rider, Bow had been thrown. And the animal had circled and headed home at a dead gallop.

So Bow Todd was back where he started, afoot in the waste country again. It was like an omen.

Like an unholy eye of evil in the cloudless heavens, the sun beat down. Todd hobbled along painfully in his fine, tight-fitting, shiny boots. There was a bump with square corners among the countless dunes and he knew it was the cabin at the crossing of the trails.

Bow Todd paused and squinted at it. There was no sign of life around the dobie rectangle. It was more bleached than ever. And a hole gaped high up in one corner where the wind and rain had washed through the baked mud.

There was just a crest of flaming glow on the western horizon when Bow paused in his circling of the dobie afoot. Circling it as he had once before. He was around so he could see the open side of the horse shed. And there was no pony in it.

Dropping his kak in the lee off a sage clump, Bow Todd waited. Darkness came. No orange glow went on in the dobie.

Bow went forward to the nearest wall, listening. There was no sound. Wearily he stalked through the door with drawn gun and struck a match. The place hadn't been lived in for years. A pack rat scurried out of a corner. Sand had drifted into a low mound over the threshold. Dust lay thick on the table and on a rusted cup.

Striking another match, Bow Todd entered the tiny backroom. There was nothing but a sagging, homemade cot in the corner. He went over and sat down on it. He was bled to the bone, having allowed himself but the barest hours of sleep in his race to the destination Lucky's cards had directed.

With a moan, he stretched his sore legs, worked his toes painfully inside the clinching boots. His hat slid forward over his eyes as he sagged back against the wall. The hand holding the faithful old Colt dropped limp on the bunk.

After a while, a vagrant gust of the rising wind gently creaked the door closed. Bow Todd never heard it. . . .

He had dropped off into a deep, troubled slumber.

HE was back in the cell of the Tucla jail again. If he looked up, he'd be able to see the aperture between his and the next cell. They were going to take him out and put a rope around his neck soon for something he didn't do.

And all the time he could hear the long, slow strides of the gent in the next cell. That was Durane, Red Durane who really had held up the stage. Those long strides—so long between each step it made a man want to hold his breath till it came—long—slow. And the one leg that dragged just a little, like maybe the sole of the boot was loose. That scuffing sound. A man with less sharp ears would never have noticed it. He'd always remember it.

There it was again. The seemingly endless moment till the next footbeat. The scuffle. Then—

Bow Todd found himself sitting bolt upright. He shook himself, suddenly feeling chilled in the cold wind of the Barren Lands. Of course, he wasn't in that Tucla jail at all. Nobody'd dare put Bow Todd in jail these days. He'd done what he said. Made himself bigger than them all.

He shook himself again. A powerful dream, that had been. He almost thought he could hear them again. Just like—he caught his breath, found himself holding it for the next step.

Then he knew he *did* hear them. They were in the front room of that cabin in the Barren Lands. The long, slow stride. The next foot—the scuffle sound as of a slightly dragging leg.

Red Durane was in the dobie!

The front door was thrust open. "They's a-comin', Red!"

"Comin', eh. . . . Sure they's no dang John Laws a-trailin' 'em?"

"Sure."

"Okay. Keep him covered when he gits in here. An' send Chuck in."

Bow hesitated. Before he could decide, he heard the Chuck gent enter. Heard Durane telling him where to stand so he could cover them from the rear. Another man poked his head in the door.

"They's a girl with him, Red!"

"A girl? Hell, naw. . . . Pretty?"

"Cain't say. Only saw her hair when she pulled off her sombrero once."

BOW heard Durane smack his lips, add: "That ranny's too irresponsible fer tuh have a squaw! Now me— Thet is, pervidin' she's pretty!"

Those in the front room heard them coming before Bow. Durane's pacing seemed to halt with his legs spaced wide. The old hinges creaked with rust as the door was pushed open slowly out front.

"Howdy, Durane."

"Howdy, Ace. Long time no see."

Inside that thin-planked door to the rear room, Bow Todd thought the trip-hammer pound of his heart must certainly be heard like drumming thunder. Ace Todd. . . . He knew that freckle-faced ranny's voice. And Molly. . . . It looked as if Lucky Mike's cards had been right, only too right!

"Those dang marshals rode me hard, Durane."

"Call me 'boss'—like the old days," Durane bade with gentle tone just slightly tinged with mockery.

"Well, yuh see—"

"Sorry I couldn't stop an' parley with yuh back in Tucla, Ace. But they was a pot-bellied ol' warhoss of a lawman 'round. Thought he was daid by now myself."

"Sure, sure, D-Durane. What I want tuh—"

Again Durane interrupted with measured deliberation. "It seems yuh wanted tuh see me bad, Ace."

Bow heard Ace's short, hoarse laugh. But it was a nervous one. "Not that, Durane! Take your paw away from the gun. I just want tuh tell yuh I'm quittin' an'—"

"Quittin'?" Durane stabbed the question.

"Cain't ride with the ol' bunch any more. I—"

"Got a woman with yuh, ain't yuh, Ace?"

"Why, y-yeah, my—"

"Tell the boys to bring her in, Pete! Easy there, Ace! Chuck ain't nursin'

that gun behind yuh fer exercise! Bring her in!"

Behind the door of the back room, Bow Todd rubbed the barrel of his Colt lovingly. Soon. . . .

There was the clatter of boots, the angry stomp of lighter, smaller ones. Bow Todd knew Molly had been brought in. He heard Durane's guffaw of delight, his throaty remarks about what a pretty looking filly she was. Then the tense, sharp voice of the Ace kid as he broke in!

"She's my wife, Durane! Sabe? That's why I want to ride straight now! I—"

"An' yuh want tuh quit, huh?" Durane's heavy voice out in. "Did yuh ever hear of a man quittin' Durane's bunch?"

"Maybe not. But I am."

"Yuh poor dang fool! An' yuh looked me up tuh tell me thet? Hell, I didn't have my men bring yuh out from Tucla fer nothin'! Yuh—"

"I come tuh ask yuh tuh give me a square deal!"

"A square deal?"

"Yep, Durane! That depitty shootin' down at the border. Yuh know I didn't do it. Sam did. An' he's dead now."

"Well-l?"

"Yuh got his gun. Got his initials laid in silver in the butt. Turn her over to them dang marshals an they'll know it ain't me. An' then—"

"Then yuh can go straight an' maybe git so upright an' honest yuh decide tuh turn state's evidence against poor ol' Durane! I had a gent do that to me once up Montana way—"

"I wouldn't do that, Red!"

"Yuh ain't a-goin' tuh get the chance!" Durane roared. "Yuh—" He broke off. When he spoke again, his voice was almost coaxing. "Sure, Ace. Go ahead. Quit. Ride off. But they's one person ain't goin' tuh quit this spread. An' thet's the filly here!"

Bow heard Molly say with that low, calm voice that he knew meant she was like an angered tigress. "I'll decide that!"

"Yuh?"

"My name was—Molly Todd! If you don't know it, my dad's the most powerful man in this country. He happens to be sure, sudden, and extremely swift death with a gun, too. . . . Bow Todd's his name."

Bow's heart swelled with pride as he heard.

"Bow Todd?" Durane roared. "I come back tuh this part of the country just to get at that skunk! No man can cross Durane an' live!"

"My dad'll shoot you down so quick—"

"Before he does," Durane chuckled, "I aim tuh see what your pretty lips taste like. Yuh, Ace, watch an' learn how a lovin' husband should kiss a wife an'—Grab his arm, Chuck!"

CHAPTER X

Bow Todd—Man!

MADDENED, Ace had tried to draw. But he was covered from behind as they grabbed his arms. Durane swung an arm around Molly Todd. Then he leaped backward, cursing after the hissing sing of a quirt. She'd struck him across the face.

"Reg'lar damned she-tiger, eh, yuh—" His fist shot out. Bow Todd heard it drive the Molly girl, with a smothered cry, back against the wall. And Bow Todd entered.

There was no cyclonic rush, no lead-spurting charge. Those gunhands of Durane's would have probably blasted him down if he had. He merely swung the door inward and stepped out. Molly saw him first from where she half lay against the wall.

Bow was behind the squat Chuck gent who had his six-gun rammed in Ace Todd's back. Bow put his own Colt a half inch between the former's ribs.

"Drop it," he commanded in that thin, boylike voice.

Stunned, the man let his gun clatter to the floor of the cabin. And the others saw Bow Todd then.

They saw a slip of a man with a bow tie and his gray Stetson cocked low over one eye and an insolent look on his face.

Durane recognized him. "The Bow Todd skunk! The—"

Unhurriedly, carelessly, Bow Todd eased his beloved Colt into its holster on his right hip, the butt poking forward. He kept his tiny hand on it, though, fingers rubbing, caressingly. And he eyed Red Durane with that impertinent stare.

Durane was a bull-chested giant of a man, old, but firm and strong as a bullock, a tower of sinew. He stood over six feet with a head crowned with a shocking thatch of white hair. Bow saw whence he got his name then.

Red Durane had a strawberry patch big as a silver dollar, a birthmark, square in the center of his broad forehead.

"You want to draw, Red?"

Durane seemed to sway forward, black-stubbled jaw clamping up, eyes sinking into his head. His mouth pinched up. Then he was grabbing for gun steel, grabbing gun steel itself. His huge hand flung up, filled.

Bow Todd grabbed across his body and captured the butt of his faithful Colt. Lead thunder crashed in the confine of the cabin as Durane let fly on the upthrust of his arm. Bow Todd was flung back against the door, a gash that reddened beneath appearing in his gray hat. Scalp flesh had been clipped.

The next instant, Bow Todd's mouth was pursed up speculatively. He was the nervy gambler again, the ex-drummer who'd staked everything on a Colt he'd found in the mud. Bow Todd stuck that Colt out in front of him and pulled the trigger twice.

Durane threw both paws clutching at his chest. Crimson drooled through his finger as he stumbled backward. More red ran over and obliterated the strawberry patch on his forehead.

"Somebody had to die for holding up that stage," Bow pronounced calmly, even as he swung.

The lop-eared gent in the corner was throwing down. Bow kept that gun stuck out in front of him and put lead through Lop-Ear's gun-arm. Then Ace had his weapon out, snaking around. Men came running from outside.

Ace shot once, missed. But the gent threw his hands up. Red-haired Ace had them all covered then, inside. Bow Todd went over to the door, stood there, measured the blackness, then fired deliberately once. A running figure buckled with a broken leg.

"Be right peaceful, you gents," Bow advised. "A man's dying in here."

BACK at the big K-P rancho up beyond Big Skull, Bow Todd sat in his dusty cubbyhole of an office. There was a bottle of Silver River Special on the roll-top desk. Open, too. But Bow wasn't drinking it.

The night was quiet except for the strumming of a Mex guitar down in front of the bunkhouse. Bow fingered the bandage around his head. Absurd, that. That head cut had healed up before they were halfway home. Still, Molly had insisted he wear it, even put it on herself. He wouldn't take it off for anything.

At the thought of them, his eyes instinctively lifted upward. He thought of how fine they looked as they started up the stairs together; him with his proud-held red head, she with a gentler look in her slumberous eyes than he'd ever known.

There was a step in the hallway. And Ace himself appeared in the doorway. Bow rose and they both stood there awkwardly.

"Yuh—yuh got that Colt on," Ace said.

Bow nodded, little fingers straying around the grip of it. Ace looked at it, at the way it hung butt forward.

"Mind—well, would yuh mind showin' me how yuh grab fer it?"

Bow Todd looked perplexed, fidgeted with his bow tie. Then he nodded. His diminutive left hand shot across his body and hauled the Colt out. He was naturally left-handed. Flushing with embarrassment at the strange procedure, he waited.

Ace shook his head and rubbed it some. "That proves it."

"What?"

"Thet yuh ain't my pop. Ma always told me how all-fired fast he was a-drawin'. Used to show me sometimes. Pop

toted his iron on his right hip. But he was right-handed, too."

Bow nodded. "Well, that's all in the past, and—"

The Ace kid was suddenly towering over him, gripping one of his shoulders in a big, long-fingered hand till it ached.

"Dang it, but I wish yuh was my pop!"

Bow's mouth worked. His light blue eyes grew misty with emotion. "You're not such a bad ranny yourself."

Afterward, he sat alone long through the night. The whisky stood beside him untasted. And his mind went back and over all the things he'd done. The guitar down in the bunkhouse stopped. Soon there were no lights but the one in his office. . . .

The first rose-flush of dawn tinted the sky outside. Bow blew out his lamp. It was because it was out he first saw the long gent standing down near the ranch-yard gate like he was waiting for something. Bow's hand found the Colt on his hip instinctively. Then he saw the strange hombre come walking forward. A gun barrel glittered faintly in his hand.

Swiftly Bow got out on the porch. The man had him covered at the steps when he appeared. Bow asked him what he wanted.

The man flashed a badge on the lapel of his coat. "U. S. deputy marshal! I come for Ace Todd, charged with murder. . . . Three of my men are around the house now. He cain't get away."

"Oh," said Bow. Then, after a while: "My name's Todd."

He went down off the porch. Bow and the marshal talked for a while.

"You'll sign a written statement swearing that the first notary we hit?"

"Yes," said Bow. "I'll only be a few minutes. Just got a couple of things to get together."

"I got your word on it, Todd. Try and make a break—"

"I'm not crazy," said Bow.

It was more than a few minutes before he came out. It was a good fifteen. Then the marshal almost choked.

"You ain't going to no wedding, mister! You'll be lucky if you beat the rope and get off with twenty years!"

"I know," said Bow. And he walked across the porch quietly, fixed his bow tie, cocked his derby down over one eye, pulled the little gray overcoat with the imitation velvet collar around him. Bow Todd was going out of Big Skull just as he'd come in years before, even to the close-fitting pants and the rundown patent-leather shoes with the ragged spats.

There was a low call in the hall behind him. Quickly he turned and got back into the shadow. It was Miss Molly, coming like she always had when he was either leaving or arriving. He thought she looked like a sort of angel in her white nightgown.

"Some men came for me. Got some business—important—down in town."

"Hurry back, won't you?" Then her arms were around him and she'd kissed him.

As he rode away, she stepped to the door. "Goodbye, Dad!"

He waved back. Couldn't say anything. Lump big as a fist in his throat. But when they got to the last spot in the trail where they could still see the rancho, he reined in and looked back a long time. After a while, he couldn't see anything, not even the house itself much less her slim white figure in the doorway.

For the eyes of Bow Todd were choked with tears. That Molly girl just never happened to think Bow was mighty young to be her father. Too young, as a matter of fact. Little Bow Todd was still a young man. He'd been in love with Molly—and not as a daughter.

IT was high noon when they hit the outskirts of Big Skull. Bow held that little black case up near the saddle horn and stared down at the horse's neck. Everything should be all right. He'd squared up that card game now. There was that will he'd written out before he left. Gave everything to Molly. Will didn't have to be witnessed if it was in

the deceased's own handwriting. Gave everything to Molly. That was right and proper. It had been her father's to begin with.

They came opposite the Golden Jubilee, somnolent in the heavy heat. Bow asked them if he could stop in and say goodbye to his old friends. They assented.

Flanked by one at each arm, the third behind, Bow Todd swaggered into the Golden Jubilee for the last time. Big John swung around from the bar, bulging-eyed.

"Hey, you got the wrong man!" he blurted, shocked off his guard.

The deputy marshal shook his head. "Don't think so. This hombre confessed to the killing."

Nobody said anything. Bow Todd just stood there, the familiar bow tie under his little face, the derby cocked down on one eye. It was just as if he'd come into Big Skull for the first time. Only he didn't have a Colt. And he did have that black case now.

An apparition.

The apparition's eyes got that insolent glitter. His mouth pursed up. Suddenly, there was nobody between Bow Todd and Big John down the bar.

"You tried to double-cross me, John," Bow said.

The marshals didn't know what was coming. Their man was standing there unarmed. Big John knew. He'd seen those danger signals before. His gun-hand jabbed down, desperate. He got to his gun.

"You failed, John," Bow said.

Then he had that little black case open. His Colt came out of it. His first friend. A hand that loved that Colt pushed it forward.

Two guns crackled in just the same instant. Big John's bullet tore into the floor. He pitched over the bar, slowly slid down. A dragging arm toppled a glass of whisky over him. But Big John couldn't even smell that whisky.

Bow turned and handed the still smoking gun to one marshal. "Here. I'll be going out of this line of business."

One of the other stunned marshals came to life. "Here! What else've you got in that damned bag?"

"Samples of one of the best lines of imitation jewelry you'll ever see, gents! Here. Take a look! Would your best girl ever suspect that wasn't a real ruby? . . ."

Watch the dim trails for Jim "White-vest" Hoya. With a ten-thousand-dollar reward on his head, he challenges the sheriff and all comers to meet him single-handed. They can collect lead—or the reward. You'll like

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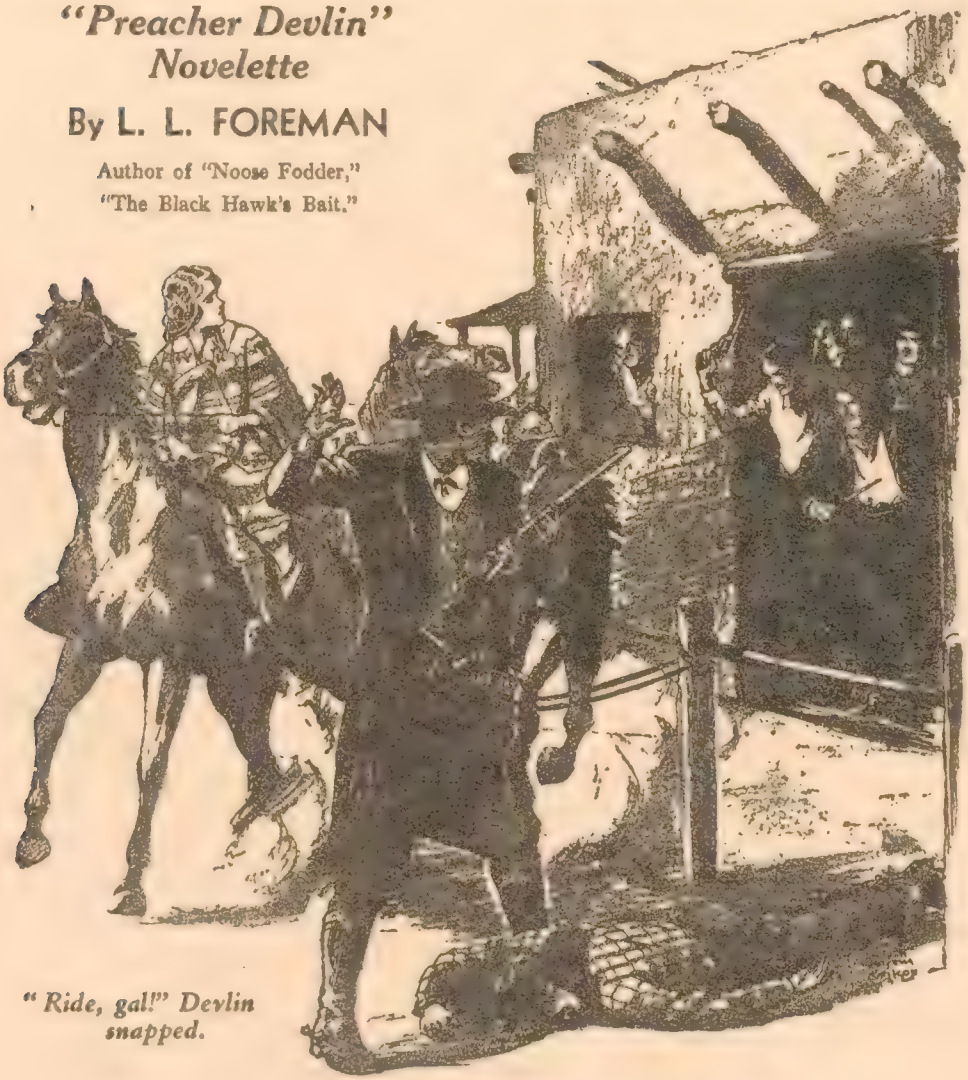

"Ride, gal!" Devlin snapped.

Preacher Devlin, that somber gun devil with the killer's eyes, outbidded a spic bandido for beautiful Vera Trenary. He forced the deal against the cold-steel threat of Aguilla's blademen, for he had two thousand dollars tied up in the purchase —and he meant to make a profit on a bitter bullet bargain.

PLAZA DES DIABLOS was a sinkhole of wickedness situated at just the right spot for its purpose, south of the Rio and the International Line, yet far enough north for the languid Mexican authorities to shrug away the reports of its existence.

It was truly a place of devils, of snake-eyed killers, reckless outcasts, swaggering Mexican raiders. Long ago its un-

savory history had started as a *bandido* hideout, a camp base for cattle rustling. It had grown to be a refuge for the scum of the border country, a haven for the hunted, a base for the predatory human animals who preyed upon their fellowmen. Each man was a law unto himself, distrustful, suspicious of his neighbor. In only one thing did they unite—against the threat of established law.

This one iron rule of *Plaza des Diablos* was manifested one blazing-hot morning when four riders trotted their mounts into the bowl that sheltered the lawless settlement. Heads popped out of low-doored dobe shacks, and hands instinctively reached for weapons.

Inside the long, squat building that housed the *cantina*, heads jerked up and voices died to a low murmur. Several men went to the door and windows to peer out at the newcomers. Their reassuring nods relaxed the wary rigidity of the crowd.

Three men, sitting at a rickety table playing poker, looked the crowd over half contemptuously, and went on with their game. They were the only gringos in the place.

A stocky, bowlegged old ruffian grinned. "Shore a skittery bunch, these spics," he murmured.

The man on his left grunted. He, too, was old, scarred—and double-gunned. One of his eye sockets was empty. "Like a pack o' danged coyotes!" he snorted disgustedly.

The third man said nothing, but chewed reflectively on an unlighted *cigarro* while he studied his cards. He was a big man, tall, with an enormous breadth of shoulders, and long, slim hands whose quiet, controlled muscles hinted at his strength. He wore a long, black coat that gave him a strangely ministerial air, and a black, flat-crowned hat with a wide brim that added to the effect.

The rest of his clothes were also dark, somber. A short black beard covered the lower part of his face, but did not hide a hard, sardonic mouth. Above the jutting, hawklike nose, two chilly gray eyes were set wide apart in the dark, saturnine face.

A strange, incongruous figure, this. Men usually looked twice at the ministerial garb, at the dark, ruthless face; then, coming to the eyes, would quickly hide their curiosity.

Those cold, mocking eyes belonged to a killer, to a grim giant who rode through life with a domineering hand. The gray eyes were quiet now, and their owner sat carelessly scanning his cards. Yet even in repose there was about this man an air of calm readiness, of latent, deadly power.

Still without speaking, he pushed forward a small stack of gold coins from the pile at his elbow. "One-eye" looked longingly at the pot, then sighed and threw in his hand.

"By me, Devlin," he said, and poured a drink.

The stocky one was about to feed the already sizeable kitty when the door was flung open, and he glanced that way. He muttered a surprised oath, and looked at his companions.

One-eye was leaning forward in his seat, staring. The man called Devlin still calmly chewed the end on his unlighted *cigarro*, but the gray eyes had narrowed ever so slightly.

Through the doorway had come the four new arrivals. A froglike, hunchbacked little Mexican, grinning and swaggering grotesquely; two ragged, long-haired Yaquis, and—a white girl.

A CHORUS of shouts went up from the crowd of Mexicans in the *cantina*, and they surged around the party, yelling questions at the self-satisfied hunchback. In a shrill cackle, he ripped out a stream of words, interrupting himself to laugh and gesture toward the girl, whose half-fainting form was held erect by the two grimacing Yaquis.

One-eye cursed. "Danged ef I kin git all thet monkey talk down my craw. It's comin' too quick fer me. Kin yuh savvy it, Devlin?"

Devlin spat out a flake of tobacco. "Yeah," he said, and his deep voice was

flat, expressionless. "Seems like that twisted little runt—name's Tino—was hired by some gringo to take his Injuns an' do a job o' killin', north o' the Line somewheres. Tino says he did the killin' an' collected his pay, but he double-crossed the gringo.

"'Stead o' deliverin' the gal, as agreed, he's brought her down here. Says he might hold the gal for a ransom from that same gringo, an' then agin he might not. Tino figgers he's pulled a right smart trick." He settled back in his chair, his eyes on the girl.

She, clad in a flimsy dress and a blanket, shrank in terror from the milling crowd of swarthy, evil faces that surged around her, and her blue eyes were wide and filled with horror. She choked on a scream as a brown, leathery hand reached out and felt the soft, fair hair that fell over her shoulders in a golden stream. The owner of the hand smiled, glanced at the hunchback, and flung out a question.

"*Cuanto*, Tino?"

The deformed outlaw squinted craftily. He had hoped for this, that some one would offer to buy the white *muchacha*. If he could get them to bidding against each other— He spread his hands and tried to give the impression that he was reluctant to let the girl go.

Black eyes stared calculatingly at him, then covetously at the captive. A few glanced a little uneasily at the three gringos who sat off by themselves, watching. Especially did they scan the big black-clad one, snatching their eyes away as they met his steady, chilling gaze.

A voice called, "*Cinco cientos pesos por la muchacha!*"

Tino shook his head. Five hundred pesos was not enough.

"*Siete cientos!*" another voice shouted, raising the bid two hundred pesos.

A tall, flashily dressed Mexican, who had been steadily looking at the girl since she had been brought in, crossed the floor, his silver spurs jingling, and stared down at her face.

"*Un' mil,*" he said curtly, and ran black eyes over the crowd.

There was silence. No one wanted to bid against the *bandido jefe*. Half the men in the room were his followers. Tino shrugged. After all, a thousand pesos was not bad for a night's work. He sidled forward with an oily smile, then stopped short as a voice said softly: "*Un' mil*—American!"

He caught his breath. One thousand American dollars was worth two thousand Mexican pesos. The bid had been doubled.

Chombo Agrilla scowled and swung around to regard this rash one, who dared bid against him. His face stiffened as he looked across the room into slate-gray eyes.

"You beed agin' me, *señor?*" he purred.

Devlin stared at him calmly. One-eye and the stocky one pushed their chairs back, ready for trouble, but the big man leaned idly on the table, chewing his *cigarro*.

"Sounds like it, don't it?" he said evenly.

The girl, held by the Yaquis, stared helplessly at the two men who faced each other. One, a Mexican outlaw with vicious cruelty written on his swarthy face; the other, a white man, a hard, grim figure with the most ruthless eyes she had ever seen. One of these two men was going to buy her as though she were a thing of barter, an animal.

The Mexican breathed hard, then spat out: "T'ree t'ousan' pesos!"

"Two thousand — American," Devlin said quietly.

The *bandido* ripped out an oath, then checked himself. A thin smile came over his face, and he shrugged and sauntered to the bar, exchanging furtive glances with the men about him.

Devlin slowly got to his feet. One-eye, without taking his attention from the crowd, said softly: "Watch yore step, *compadre*. Thet spic's got another cyard ter play!"

The big man smiled. His strange eyes were as opaque as flint as he walked across the room in a dead silence, and took the shrinking girl by the arm. The Yaquis released her. Tino, wincing as

those cold eyes met his own, held out a greedy, clawlike hand.

"The money, *señor.*"

THE white man stared down at him, then slowly reached under his long black coat, untied two canvas bags from his belt, and dropped them into the waiting hands. The hunchback immediately started for the door, clutching them to him, and sending a fearful glance at Chombo Agrilla.

There was a flash of steel as something whirred through the air, a soft thud, and Tino fell, choking, still clutching the two canvas bags with a miser's grasp. The haft of a knife protruded from high up on his back, between the shoulder blades.

Agrilla grinned and drew his guns in one swift movement. It was the signal for every Mexican in the place to slap leather. They would show this big gringo how foolish it was to cross the will of the *jefe* of *Plaza des Diablos!*

One-eye and his stocky partner were on their feet and heading for the door, guns out, when the first shot was fired. It came from Devlin. The big gunman had wheeled like a cat, sent the girl hurtling to the door with a backward shove of a hand, and now stood with a long-barreled six-gun poking from each fist.

Chombo Agrilla dropped his guns, clutched at his chest, and crumpled to the floor. For an instant the Mexicans were stunned by the swiftness of the draw and the killing of their *jefe*. Then a man screamed an epithet and fired. One-eye stumbled, spun around, and blazed back.

A dozen guns answered his, and he dropped. His stocky partner leaped over him, cursing and shooting, tripped to his knees as a bullet struck him, then staggered to Devlin.

"Yuh danged hell-hound, Devlin!" he gasped weakly. "Yuh've got us all killed!" He turned, and his guns joined the long-barreled ones in a roaring tattoo.

The somber-clad gunman grinned crookedly as he backed to the door, jerking his triggers methodically.

"Helluva loss!" he muttered. "Cut for the door, hombre. We're leavin'!"

"I—cain't!" the other said faintly, and his legs folded under him.

Devlin swore, emptied his guns into the thick of the scrambling crowd of howling Mexicans, and flipped them back into their hidden holsters under the long black coat. He ducked, came up with the man in his arms, and turning, dashed through the doorway into the open.

Three saddled horses stood at the hitchrack, while the girl, handicapped by her long dress, was desperately striving to mount a fourth, a mean-eyed, half-broken pinto. The gunfighter dropped his burden, grasped the girl and flung her into the saddle of the plunging brute.

"Ride gal!" he snapped. "Ride like hell—north!"

With a slap of his hand he sent the animal charging at the northern slope of the bowl, snatched a carbine from the nearest saddle holster, and sent a shot at a head that appeared in a window hole of the *cantina.* Several figures came running from the dobe shacks. They scattered as the carbine cracked again. Devlin picked up the stocky form, glanced at the face, and grunted. The man was dead.

"Guess you were two-thirds right, at that!" he muttered, and placed him on the ground again. *"Adios."*

The door of the *cantina* burst open and spewed men as Devlin started to leap for the nearest corner. With a snarl, he clubbed the short, heavy carbine, turned, and smashed full tilt into them, swinging the weapon with all the strength of his long, powerful arms.

At the first bone-crushing blow, a head was broken like an eggshell. Inside of twenty seconds, the doorway was a shambles, with swarthy-faced renegades screaming imprecations, fighting to escape back into the *cantina,* away from this huge, glaring gringo savage with his death-dealing club.

Then suddenly he was gone, and the splintered carbine lay there on the ground, among the battered bodies of the fallen. No one wanted to be the

first to step over that crimson-spattered threshold again.

Scorning the three saddled horses, Devlin headed for the shelter where he had left his own mount and saddle. It was twenty yards away, and not a shot followed him as he covered the distance. In the primitive stables, he saddled his big black, reloaded his two guns with swift, steady fingers, then mounted. Skirting the *cantina* and the dobe shacks, he headed his mount north at a fast, swinging lope.

COMING up out of the bowl, he looked ahead along the trail. A cloud of dust in the distance showed where the girl was holding the pinto to its top stride. The gunman's hard mouth twisted into a smile.

Half an hour later the girl heard hoofbeats behind her, and looked back to see black horse and black rider rapidly overtaking her. Frantically she urged the pinto on, slapping its flanks with her small hands, even pleading with it. The hoofbeats sounded closer, until she was afraid to look around.

Then, as they drummed alongside, out of the corner of her eye she saw the white blur of the man's face turned toward her. For a moment the two horses raced together, then Devlin, without a word, leaned out of his saddle, grasped the pinto's bridle, and slowed them easily down to a walk.

"You'll blow your hoss, at that pace," he said mildly.

The girl made no answer, but stared straight ahead of her with fear-ridden eyes.

For five minutes they rode silently on. Once Devlin looked back along the trail. There were no signs of any pursuit.

"What's your name—an' your story?" the man asked suddenly.

The girl flinched, but still made no answer.

A minute later the man's voice came again, quiet, but with a steely note of command. "I asked you a question."

She turned hesitantly toward him, then paled as she took in the figure of the man who had bought her. Fascinated with horror, she stared wide-eyed at the crimson-stained hands. Raising her eyes to his, she gave a little cry and shrank away.

"Don't—don't touch me!" she gasped. "I'd—I'd rather die! Those hands! *Killer's* hands!"

Devlin's features remained expressionless, but his dark skin seemed slowly to grow a shade darker. The gray eyes went icily blank and opaque.

"Don't worry. I ain't goin' to touch you," he said, and his voice was harsh, bitter. He stared coldly. "Just answer my questions. Who are you, an' where are you from? Speak up!"

The girl trembled and bit her lips to stop their quivering. Like a wild, startled thing, she kept her eyes fastened on his hands, watching them, expecting the worst, yet with a tiny hope that the inevitable might be postponed.

"I—my name is Vera Trenary," she half whispered, her low-toned voice faltering. "My father is—was Dave Trenary. He was killed last night by those —those men who—"

Devlin nodded curtly. "Tino an' his Yaquis, yeah. Your father was a cattleman, wasn't he? What outfit, an' where?"

"The Y Bar O," she answered, still watching his hands. "It's about five or six hours' ride north of the Rio Grande. I—I know the way."

"What other folks have you got? What about your father's cowhands? Didn't they show any fight?"

Vera Trenary shook her head. "I haven't any folks down here, now. We—my family—came from Colorado." The blue eyes filled with a sudden gush of tears. "There wasn't anyone at the ranch last night but dad and me. We haven't been able to hire hands for two years, and—and a week ago we lost the last of our cattle. They were stolen."

The gunman said nothing. It was a common enough story. A ranch plundered by rustlers, cowhands scared off—and men always coveted a beautiful girl. His hand moved to a breast-pocket for

a fresh *cigarro,* and the girl shrank quickly at the movement. Devlin noticed.

"Maybe you'd rather be back there in that hell-hole I dragged you out of, huh?" he growled. "Looks like two thousand dollars an' two fair-to-middlin' white men got flung away for a damn poor reason!"

GILL GALLAGHER yawned wearily and poured himself a fresh mug of black coffee. "Lord," he muttered, "I could use 'bout ten hours' sleep."

His eyes, red-rimmed from long hours of wakefulness, roamed about the living room of his ranch-house until they settled on a cracked leather holster and gun belt that hung on a nail in the wall. In the holster was an old-style forty-four, with the initials J. G. roughly carved in the walnut butt. Gill's face hardened.

The two old cowpunchers who sat with him over the evening meal followed his glance, and their mouths grew straight and grim.

"Won't be no sleep fer the Double Arrow ez long ez 'Jefe' Janisch bosses Sweetwater," rumbled one of them, a gnarled, white-haired old-timer. "Yore dad found thet out."

Gill nodded, and glanced at a window. It was dark outside. "You an' Old Sid better get some rest, 'Whitey.' I'll watch the herd tonight, an'—"

"The hell yuh will, Gill!" Whitey flatly contradicted his young boss. "Sid an' me kin—" He halted, and raised a warning hand, listening.

From outside came hoofbeats. Old Sid grabbed the kerosene lamp and extinguished it, leaving them in darkness. Swiftly the three men slipped outside.

Through the darkness two riders loomed up, and a deep voice hailed: "Hello, the house!"

The hail was followed by a girl's voice.

"Gill! Gill Gallagher!"

Gill came forward, his two old cowhands behind him.

"Why, Vera! What're you doin' 'way over here at this time o' night?"

The big black shape beside the girl answered for her. "S'pose you hombres light that lamp agin, an' rustle up some chow, 'fore you ask questions. This gal's 'bout all in."

Old Sid squinted up for an instant at the black shape, gave a low whistle, and hastened back into the house.

Devlin waited until the lamp was lighted, then swung down from his saddle. As he stalked to the house, he glanced at the young rancher.

"Better help that gal out o' her saddle an' into the house," he said shortly.

Gill, wondering, lifted the girl's slight figure and carried her into the house. Gently he lowered her onto a couch, and she almost immediately dropped into an exhausted sleep. With something more than pity, the young man looked down into her tired, pale face, then swung around to face the big stranger who had brought her.

"What's happened?" he demanded. "Where's Dave Trenary? An' who are you?"

The man in black ignored the questions while he lifted the coffee pot from the fire, poured himself a mugful, and sipped it. Over the rim, he calmly regarded his questioner. Whitey and Old Sid, standing in the background, exchanged meaning glances.

"Dave Trenary was killed last night," Devlin said between sips of coffee. "A spic by the name o' Tino, an' a couple o' Yaquis, blotted him out an' took the gal down to *Plaza des Diablos.*"

His listeners muttered oaths. Gill stared at the sleeping girl. He swore. "More o' Jefe Janisch's work!" He turned back to the tall stranger, frowning. "But what's she doin' with you? An' who are you?"

Devlin sipped again, then nodded toward the couch. "She'll tell you the rest, I reckon, when she wakes up." His gray eyes flicked to Old Sid. "An' 'Three-Card Sid,' there, is achin' to tell you who I am!"

Old Sid's jaw dropped, then he grinned. "Gosh!" he grunted. "Long time since I was called thet! 'Bout fifteen years." He looked at his boss. "Gill, I don't hafta tell yuh 'bout this gent—

jist his name. He's—'Preacher' Devlin!"

GILL GALLAGHER drew a deep breath. "Lord!" he muttered. "Preacher Devlin!" And he stared at the huge black figure of the notorious gunfighter, at the famous ministerial coat that hid the deadly, long-barreled guns, and at the bleak eyes. He swallowed hard. "Preacher Devlin!" he whispered again, then slowly turned his head to regard the sleeping girl, his mind whirling with vague, black thoughts.

Preacher Devlin put down his empty mug and walked to the door. Old Sid followed him.

"I'll he'p yuh put away yore hosses, Devlin."

While unsaddling the pinto in the stables, the old man sent furtive glances at the big gunman, who was tending his black.

"Used ter be right smart of an outfit, this here Double Arrow spread," he said casually, after a while. "Ain't no better range in Sweetwater than this'n. Gill's dad wuz old Jim Gallagher. He got killed two years ago. Jefe Janisch done bushwhacked him."

Devlin said nothing.

The old man waited a minute, then went on, "This here Jefe Janisch, he's aimin' ter put all Sweetwater in his pocket. Done got most of it, already, usin' gunhands an' spics ter do his dirty work, like thet Trenary raid last night. Bet he's added the O Bar Y range ter his spread right now, an' kin show some crooked paper ter prove he bought it, er sumthin'. He's done got this here outfit o' Gill's purty nigh sewed up, too, what with beef stealin' an' buyin' off all our good hands."

Vainly he waited for the other to show an interest. Finally, with another furtive glance at the silent gunman, he said tentatively: "He's a killer, thet Janisch. Ain't airy man I know kin beat him ter the draw, the dirty, lowdown—"

"Used to be kinda handy on the draw yourself, didn't you, old-timer?" Devlin's voice broke in quietly. "Whyn't you take a whirl at him?"

The old cowpuncher blinked, and sent a suspicious glance at the other. "Hell!" he grunted. "I ain't in his class—never was!"

Devlin bunked in the ranch-house that night. Next morning, breakfast was an awkward, strained affair. Gill, red-eyed from a night-long vigil over his cattle, saw the grief and horrible fear in the eyes of Vera Trenary. His mind was aflame as he noticed her shrinking from the silent Devlin. Whitey, who had shared guard with Gill, was thick-headed with sleepiness.

All became wide awake and alert when, two hours after sunup, a band of riders cantered up to the house. Gill went out to meet them. Behind him, Old Sid scowled and hitched his gun belt as he recognized the men, and Whitey breathed an oath.

"Janisch an' some o' his gunhands. What in hell does he want?"

The big, blond man who sat his horse in front of his bunch, stared at Gill Gallagher, a glint of triumph in his eyes. He was tall, bony, and well muscled. When he spoke, his thin lips hardly moved. Without greeting, he cut straight into the matter that had brought him there.

"Gallagher, I bought out Walt Salkeld this mornin'." A grin flitted over his long face for a bare instant, as he noted the quick dismay that the young rancher tried to cover up. "I took up yore notes thet he was holdin', too. They're overdue by nine days. I'm comin' back tomorrer, with Sheriff Hollinger, an' ef yuh ain't got the cash ter meet them notes—an' I know damn well yuh ain't—I'm takin' over yore spread, or what's left o' it!"

He looked malevolently at the two old cowpunchers. "An' ez fer yuh two old crowbaits, I'm givin' yuh warnin' right now thet—" His teeth clicked shut as he looked past them, and a muscle in his cheek quivered.

Vera Trenary stood just inside the door, her accusing eyes fixed upon him.

For a moment there was a deep silence, then Janisch exhaled a long-held

breath, and said steadily: "Hello, Vera. What yuh doin' so fur from home—an' in this two-bit spread? Ef yuh want to go visitin', well—" He made a small, eloquent gesture with his hands. "Why not come over to the Triangle J?"

Gill Gallagher started forward. "Why, yuh—" he began furiously, when Whitey caught him and held him back.

"Stiddy, son," warned the old man. "Don't yuh see thet's jist what he wants? Fer yuh ter start sumthin'?"

Janisch glowered at them. His hands were resting on his two ivory-handled guns, and his men were leaning forward expectantly in their saddles, ready to back his play.

"I gotta mind ter cut down on the three o' yuh right now!" he snarled. "An' take thet gal whar I figger she belongs!"

He edged his horse around with his knees, his hands still resting on the ivory butts. Then from the north corner of the house to his right, a calm voice spoke up.

"Reckon yuh don't know you're talkin' 'bout my property, huh?"

ALL heads jerked that way. Janisch peered, narrow-eyed, at the big, somber-clad stranger who leaned nonchalantly against the corner.

"What in hell yuh talkin' 'bout—*yore* property? Yuh honin' ter buck trouble, stranger?"

Devlin's eyes were blank. "Thet gal—" He nodded casually at Vera. "She's mine. I bought her from your hunchback friend —Tino, the spic."

"What—do—yuh—mean?" Janisch rasped slowly, and his fingers curled about the butts. One of his men uttered a startled exclamation, and nudged his horse out of the line of fire, careful to show his hands in full view.

"Holy smoke!" he croaked frantically. "Don't draw, Jefe! Thet's — thet's Preacher Devlin!"

Janisch drew a shuddering breath, his eyes fastened on the frigid orbs of the man in black. Then slowly, reluctantly, his hands came away from his holsters, empty. For a long moment his light eyes flickered over Gill Gallagher, the girl—and came back to Devlin. Then, without a word, he wheeled his horse and cantered off, his men hastily following.

Devlin watched them ride away, then walked into the house. The others followed. Gill sank into a chair and stared broodingly into space. Once his eyes fell on Vera's face, and he winced and looked away again. Whitey shifted awkwardly on his feet, stared at Old Sid, and coughed.

"What—what yer aimin' ter do, Gill? 'Bout them notes, I mean," he blurted out finally. "How much they fur?"

His young boss sighed wearily. "Three thousand dollars. I borrowed it from old Walt to keep this outfit runnin'. Walt told me not to worry about it if I couldn't meet 'em on time, when he heard about my yearlin's bein' run off, six months ago. Guess Janisch musta froze him out, like he's doin' me, an' forced him to sell. Lord!"

He hit the palm of his hand with a clenched fist. "Three thousand dollars! An' this place is worth ten! I'll have to leave the valley, an' get a job ridin' for some outfit that ain't—" His eyes fell on Vera. The girl's blue eyes were pleading. He paled, then flushed. "An' you, Vera—you've got no place to go, now. Would—would you come—" He stopped as he felt the cold eyes of the gunman upon him.

"No," said Devlin. "She wouldn't! Have I got to remind you that she's mine, that I bought her?"

Gill's eyes were hot, furious, as he glared back at the big man. "Good God, man!" he grated. "D'you think a girl can be bought an' sold like a horse? D'you think you can make her your property because you ransomed her? No man can get away with that!" He jumped to his feet, trembling. His mind, clouded from want of sleep, knew nothing but a red rage. "Not even Preacher Devlin!" he snarled, and his right hand snapped to his hip.

Devlin waited until the gun was clear of its holster, then his left arm shot out like a whiplash. Long, steely fingers

gripped Gill's wrist, twisted, and the gun dropped to the floor. Drawing the furious, disarmed man to him, the gunman's hard mouth twisted into a smile.

"You've swallered yer head, son," he said quietly. "Better quit strugglin'. I could break you if I'd a mind to." He shoved the younger man into a chair and faced him. "Listen to me, you redheaded bronco! If, in that excuse for a head you've got, there's any funny notions concernin' that gal an' me, jest forget 'em. I wouldn't touch her with a forty-foot saddle rope!" His cold eyes swept over the girl, and he repeated: "Not with a forty-foot saddle rope!"

He waited to let that sink in, then continued. "But I got two thousand dollars tied up in her—that's what she cost me. Maybe"—his face, always hard, became stern and flinty—"maybe there was a time when I'd have taken a 'thank you,' an' figgered the money well spent, but that time's past.

"I aim to collect that purchase price from somebody, Gallagher, 'fore I let her go! Now, you got a ranch here, with a debt of three thousand dollars ag'in' it. I got a notion that if this outfit was mine, I could sorta persuade that Janisch hombre to fergit those notes for awhile, till I sold this place."

Gill stared up at him. "You mean—"

Devlin nodded. "Yeah. I'll trade you the gal for a bill o' sale on your spread, lock-stock-an'-barrel. Furthermore, you stay on here as foreman. Is it a deal?"

The lean, tired face of the young rancher ceased its twitching. For a moment he said nothing, then he looked up and nodded. "It's a trade, Devlin."

WHITEY and Old Sid looked at each other bewilderedly, and wandered out through the door, shaking their heads, trying to realize that this queer trade had actually happened. Whitey looked at his partner.

"Sid, I've seen ranches sold, bought, stolen, an' throwed away. But I never, so he'p me, see'd one traded fer a woman afore!"

Old Sid nodded. "Nor me. But I tell yuh what, pardner. Yo're workin' now fer a fightin' son thet's dropped better men than Jefe Janisch ever thought o' bein'!"

Vera Trenary, only half believing what she had heard, almost ran to Gill. He rose to meet her, his eyes shining.

"Am I—am I yours now, Gill?" the girl whispered.

The young man put an arm gently about her. "Mine, Vera."

Vera Trenary looked at Devlin, and her face was flushed, ashamed. "I—I think I realize now," she faltered, "the mistake I made. I didn't know—I thought—" She stopped, for the gunman, with a blank look, passed and walked out of the room.

On the threshold, he looked back at her. "You can stay on here, too—as cook!" And he went on his way.

Old Sid, saddling a horse in the stable, glanced up as Devlin entered.

"We need more hands, don't we?" asked the new boss of the Double Arrow.

The old cowpuncher nodded. "Hell, yes! 'Bout five, but whar yuh goin' ter git 'em?"

"Down in Sweetwater."

"Sweetwater?" the old man echoed, and spat into the dust. "Thar ain't a man in Sweetwater worth a hoot thet ain't a Janisch man!"

"Saddle up," Devlin ordered shortly. "We're goin' to find out. Go tell Gallagher I want him along."

Fifteen minutes later, Devlin, Gill and Old Sid were riding north for Sweetwater.

It was afternoon when they walked their mounts down the main street of the little cowtown. Gill ran his eyes over the ponies at the hitchrack outside the Long Horn Saloon.

"Janisch is in town," he said significantly. "There's his horse—an' half them others belong to his men, too. Reckon they're all in the Long Horn."

"We'll take a look-see," Devlin announced. "I need a drink, anyway."

They dismounted, left their mounts at the hitchrack, and pushed open the batwing doors. At their entrance, a man

in a far corner gave a sharp, shrill whistle that cut through the noisy talk of the crowd like a knife. Immediately, all eyes turned to regard the three newcomers, and there was silence.

Apparently oblivious of the furtive glances sent his way, Devlin walked up to the bar and gestured toward a bottle. Gill and Old Sid ranged themselves alongside, filled glasses, and drank, acutely aware of the strained silence.

Unhurriedly Devlin downed a second drink, then turned his back to the bar and ran his eyes over the crowd. Meeting the impact of that cold, deliberate stare, men hastily turned their attention elsewhere.

Janisch was sitting at a table with four of his hired gunslingers. Devlin studied him for a second, then walked over to the table and stood behind him.

"Git up!" he snapped.

Janisch grew rigid, and his long face paled. His men, staring up at the big gunman, remained as still as statues. Slowly Janisch twisted around and looked up into the dark face above him. His mouth was a straight, bloodless line, but with an attempt at bluffing, he snarled: "Yuh mean me, Devlin?"

A hand shot out, gripping his shirt, and hauled him to his feet. A long, sighing gasp went up from the crowd. Jefe Janisch—high-handed Jefe Janisch—who had ruled Sweetwater by gun law and force for seven years, who had bullied, killed, and tricked his way into owning half the town and the better part of the valley, was being contemptuously manhandled, in his own saloon and surrounded by his hired killers! More than one man breathed a glad sigh at the sight.

Devlin, with a handful of shirt in his fist, stared into the contorted face. "Listen, yuh two-bit badman!" he growled. "Them notes yuh're holdin' ag'inst the Double Arrow—fergit 'em, git me? Thet spread's mine! Mine, d'yuh hear?"

His eyes flicked at one of the four men who sat at the table. "Don't try it, hombre!" he barked. "It ain't a good bet!"

THE man quickly took his hands out from under the table. Another man, standing at the far end of the bar, had been stealthily easing out a gun. Thinking this was his chance, he whipped out the weapon.

There was a quick movement from Devlin, the roar of a shot, and smoke drifted up from a long barrel that jutted from his right hand. The man at the end of the bar groaned, dropped his gun, and staggered to the doors.

Reaching them, he pitched forward, knocking them wide open, and landed on the boardwalk outside. The batwing doors swung back on their hinges, flapped a few times, then came together again. Below them could be seen the feet of the fallen man.

In the deep silence that followed, Devlin's voice came thinly. "Anybody else want to take a chance?"

There were no takers.

Gill and Old Sid, their hands on their gun butts, darted their eyes over the crowd, picking out Janisch men, noting their positions, waiting for them to blow up.

Old Sid sighed gently, and inwardly vowed to quit the Double Arrow spread if he ever got out of this alive. This kind of death-courting business might be all right for Preacher Devlin, but it was too hard on the nerves for a spavined old ex-cardshark.

Devlin shoved Janisch back into his chair. The bony frame of the blond man was shaking with rage, his long face quivering with fury, but he knew better than to make a false move. His prestige in Sweetwater was gone, he knew, but better that than his life. This big, black-looking devil with the stony eyes—this ace of gunfighters—would blast his life out of existence as casually as he had that other's.

Trembling, his thin lips working like those of a mad dog, he got to his feet again, backed a dozen paces, then turned and blindly pushed his way through the doors. The four men at the table slowly rose to their feet, their wary eyes fixed unblinkingly on Devlin, and walked out.

A half dozen more stepped out of the crowd and silently followed.

Preacher Devlin let his eyes drift over the remaining men in the saloon, lingering here and there, appraising, weighing, then spoke: "I'm hirin' men," he said shortly. "Good men—five of 'em."

He regarded a lanky, hatchet-faced individual. "Yuh on Janisch's pay roll?"

The lanky man nodded, and shifted uncomfortably.

"How much is he payin' yuh?"

"Hundred a month."

Devlin nodded. "Fightin' pay, huh? I'll double it. Pack your warbag an' be ready to leave 'fore sundown. That is" —he finished softly—"ef yuh want to work for me."

The man blinked, then grinned. "Reckon I do, Devlin. Yuh're holdin' the highest cyards. An' I'm ready ter leave right now. Done got my warbag packed right hyar in my holster!" He lounged forward and took his place beside Gill and Old Sid at the bar.

In the same manner, Devlin picked four more. All had been Janisch men, drifting gunmen and hard cases who were ready to work or fight for any cause, as long as it offered high pay. Under the leadership of this notorious ace gunfighter—and for two hundred a month—they were ready to tear hell apart.

Old Sid eyed the new Double Arrow hands, exchanged a glance with Gill, then looked at Devlin.

"Cripes!" he breathed. "Ef old Jim Gallagher coulda seen this, he'd set up in his grave an' cheer! Reckon I'll hang on a while longer."

An hour later they left the saloon, mounted, and trotted out of town. It was dark when they reached the Double Arrow range.

"Funny," Gill muttered. "Can't see any light in the house."

With a vague foreboding, he pushed his mount ahead of the others and forged on. When the others drew up before the house and dismounted, a light showed from the open door and they could hear somebody swearing. They went in. Gill was kneeling on the floor beside the form of Whitey. The old man's head was clotted with blood, and he was groaning curses in a monotonous stream.

"Dammit, Whitey!" Gill was yelling. "What's happened? Where's Vera? Tell me, man!"

"Thet danged Janisch!" the white-haired old cowpuncher groaned. "Him an' his bunch come ridin' up jist after sundown. Sheriff Hollinger wuz with 'em—said they wuz his deppities—said he wuz arrestin' the gal fer murderin' an' robbin' her own dad! I went fer my gun, but one of them clipped me over the haid with his butt. Thet dirty, low-down—" He went on cursing.

Gill, his face white and strained, stared blindly about him. Devlin glanced at his men.

"This here Sheriff Hollinger. Is he on the Janisch pay roll, too?"

The five men nodded. "Shore," said one of them. "He takes his orders from the Jefe. Useter ride fer the Triangle J."

Gill got to his feet, ripped out an oath and started for the door. Devlin grasped him by an arm and whirled him around.

"Just a minute, son," he said quietly. "Don't go boggin' your head. Stay with the bunch. We're all going to trail back to Sweetwater, pronto. But play your hand with mine, if yuh want to see that gal agin. I got my own ideas 'bout this thing. Sid, you stay with Whitey. C'mon, yuh hombres—we're goin' to town!"

THREE hours later, with Sweetwater a half mile ahead, Devlin signaled for a halt.

"Any o' yuh hombres got a friend that wouldn't yell for Janisch if he saw yuh in town tonight?" he asked.

The lanky individual pushed forward. "'Dozey' Blake, what runs the general store—I owe him fifty dollars." He grinned. "Reckon he wouldn't wanna see me killed!"

"Go in an' talk with him," Devlin ordered. "Find out if the gal's in the jail. Find out how many Janisch men are in town, an' where they are. We'll be wait-

in' for yuh in that little holler, just off the trail, west o' here. Git!"

The man urged his mount forward without a word, and disappeared in the darkness. An hour later he returned, rode into the brush-covered hollow, and whistled. An answering whistle came from farther on, and he pushed his horse forward. A sound from the rear made him whirl. The big black figure of Devlin loomed up behind him.

The lanky man gulped. "Hell's bells, Devlin! Yuh like to have skeered me plumb outta my saddle!"

"What'd yuh find out?" the big man asked, as they came up with Gill and the rest of the men.

"Plenty!" was the quick reply. "The Trenary gal's locked in the jail, all by herse'f. Ain't another soul in thar with her. But it's suicide ter go near thet jail house, Devlin! Ain't a light showin' in town, the Long Horn's shet up tight, an' Jefe's down thar with ev'ry man on his pay roll. They're all spread out, Dozey says, an' hidin', with their sights lined up on thet there jail, waitin' fer certain gents ter come a-visitin'!"

"I figgered on somethin' like that," Devlin said grimly. "Janisch is usin' the gal as bait to draw us into a trap." He was silent a moment, then asked: "Where's the Triangle J ranch-house located? That's Janisch's headquarters, ain't it?"

"'Bout a half hour's ride north o' town," somebody answered.

The gunman nodded. "Good. Tell me the route. I'm goin' there!" He waved aside Gill's half-uttered protests. "I know what I'm doin', son. We'll have the gal outta that jail 'fore mornin'."

After getting directions, Devlin nodded again, and gave crisp orders. "Gallagher, yuh take the men an' get posted somewheres on the other side o' town, where you can watch the north trail without bein' seen. 'Bout an hour or two from now, there'll maybe be a couple o' riders come foggin' in from the Triangle J.

"Let 'em ride into town, an' don't let 'em see yuh. Soon after that, I figger Janisch an' most o' his bunch'll pass yuh, headin' like hell for the ranch. Yuh know what to do then. Give 'em time to git clear, then slam into town with all yuh got an' bust that jail wide open!"

He peered through the darkness at the younger man. "Git it?"

"Yeah," Gill said, frowning. "But I don't get how you're goin' to draw Janisch an' his bunch out o' town. How you goin' to—"

"That's my business!" the gunman broke in grimly. "*Adios!*" And he was gone.

The ranch-house of the Triangle J was a big, two-storied wooden building, set squarely on the top of a low hill A collection of smaller buildings was scattered about it, and the horse corral was at the foot. Only one light showed. It came from one end of what was evidently a bunkhouse. The big house itself was dark and silent.

Devlin, dismounting in a small cottonwood grove two hundred yards from the house, patted the velvety nose of his black. "Wait for me, *compadre,*" he whispered, and slipped away.

Mounting the eastern slope of the hill with long, noiseless strides, the tall gunman's eyes roamed over the buildings. Aside from that one light in the bunkhouse, there was no sign of life about the place. The lanky one had evidently got a straight story. Janisch had pressed almost every available man into duty in the ambush around the Sweetwater jail house, fully expecting an attempted rescue of the girl he held as bait for the trap.

Silently Devlin came up to the dark house and circled it, trying doors and windows. The place was locked and barred tightly. Carefully he stepped onto the porch, testing each board for betraying squeaks. The big front doors were also fastened.

Without hesitation, he stepped up onto the low railing, grasped a wooden pillar, and climbed lithely to the upstairs porch. A window here was unfastened. As silently as a cat, the big man raised it and eased himself through.

Like a black shadow, he moved through the house, down a wide staircase, and reached the bottom floor. Finding his way to the kitchen, he paused there, searched around until he found what he sought. It was a drum of lamp oil. He filled a big kettle with the inflammable liquid, then deliberately began pouring it over the walls and floor.

The kettle empty, he set it down, and searched again, this time along the shelves. Again his search was rewarded, this time with a cardboard box half full of cartridges. Stooping, he emptied the box onto the floor and scattered the shells with his foot.

Finally he struck a match, cupping the light with his hands, and held it against the oil-soaked floor. A flame flickered, then spread rapidly into a sheet of fire.

DISCARDING caution now, Devlin made his way to the front doors, snapped back the patent lock, and stepped out. All was still quiet in the bunkhouse, twenty yards off to his left. He flipped out his guns, then with a bloodcurdling yell, sent a bullet crashing through the lighted window, and jumped from the porch.

There came startled oaths and the sounds of mad scrambling, and the door of the bunkhouse slammed open. Three men leaped out. They stopped short as they sighted the red glow in the windows of the big house.

One of them roared: "The house is afire! What the—" His voice was cut short by three barking explosions as the cartridges on the kitchen floor began popping in the heat.

Devlin, fifty yards away in the shadows, fired again, and another windowpane was shattered. The shot was followed by staccato reports from the house, and one of the three men began to fire blindly about him. From the shadows, Devlin cut loose with three quick shots, leaped to another point, and fired again.

Deliberately he was sending his bullets inches from their legs, but the men were not to know that. With hot lead whining around them from several points in the shadows, and rattling bursts of fire from the flaming house, it seemed to them that there were at least a dozen raiders storming the place.

They hesitated, firing about them in desperation, then streaked for the corral. Devlin chuckled as he watched them, then sent two more shots and a nerve-racking shriek to speed them on their way.

Just north of Sweetwater, Gill and his men listened to drumming hoofs.

"Hyar comes them riders, foggin' in from the Triangle J, jist ez Devlin said they would," one of the men remarked, and swore admiringly. "Thet'll be 'Cookie' an' them two wranglers—skeered plumb to death, I bet!"

A few minutes later, three riders came tearing down the trail, passed the six hiding men, and sped on into town.

"They're shore burnin' up them broncs," a voice observed. "Reckon the Preacher musta put the fear o' hell inter them!"

Ten minutes later a band of horsemen came thundering out of Sweetwater, riding like mad. The six men watched them sweep by, waited until the hoofbeats had grown faint, then at a word from Gill, grimly took the road into town.

Sweetwater seemed deserted when they rode in. In silence the little band dismounted at the back of the jail house, flicking quick glances about at the shadows, and ran around to the front. Gill put his shoulder to the door. It opened at a touch. Warily he stepped inside, his gun drawn, suspicious of a trap.

A man came out of an alley across the street, halted, stared at the silent figures in front of the jail, then ducked, yelling an alarm. Somewhere a door crashed open, and men came running. Then from the silent group of men a gun cracked out. From a window across the street, a rifle barked a quick reply. Another shot from the group, a tinkle of glass, and the rifle was silenced.

Inside the jail, Gill stared into two cells whose doors swung wide open. They were empty!

Janisch, spurring his mount like a madman, looked ahead at a red glare, and cursed savagely. As the band swept over the last rise of ground, they could see the house, flames licking at the east wing. Too late to save it now probably. No sign of the reported raiders, either.

Jefe Janisch, who had so often instigated the burning and looting of others' homes, gnawed his thin lips in fury as he saw his own big ranchhouse going up in flames. Reaching the doomed building, he leaped from his lathered horse, hit the ground running, and dashed through the wide-open front doors.

Without a halt, he went up the wide staircase to the top floor, kicked open the door of his bedroom, and fumbled for the lamp. Lighting it, he peered apprehensively about him, but nothing, seemingly, had been disturbed.

With a sigh of relief, Janisch flung aside a bearskin rug, and knelt on the floor. With his fingers he pried up two close-fitting boards, and reached through the opening. Then as he drew forth a heavy leather grip, a voice sounded above him.

"All right, hombre—I'll take it!"

Jefe Janisch gasped, and his long, bony head swiveled around. Above him stood a tall black figure he recognized all too well. Devlin's hard mouth was twisted in a sneering grin, his gray eyes mocking. His long arm shot out and snatched the bag.

Then Janisch, crazy with fear and rage, went for his guns.

DEVLIN made no attempt to draw his own weapons. Instead, he swung the bag down on the long head. Janisch was knocked sprawling against the floor by the blow, and lay motionless.

The big gunman hefted the bag thoughtfully, and eyed the unconscious man. "Well," he muttered, "that's one time your loot got too heavy for yuh!"

He stooped, put the leather grip under his left arm, and took a good grasp on the man's shirt. Dragging the senseless figure behind him, he made his way out of the room and to the head of the stairs. He looked down, through the front doorway.

A man with a bucket went running past, while shouts and the sounds of crashing glass rang out from the rear of the house. Smoke poured through cracks in the flooring, and the heat was stifling. Soon now the flames would spread from the east wing, and the whole building would be a raging inferno.

Dragging Janisch, he went down the stairs and took a quick look outside. All the men were at the back of the house, fighting the fire. Dropping the semiconscious man on the ground beside the porch, he darted away and into the shadows, the leather bag still under his arm.

Halfway down to the cottonwood grove, he looked back—and stopped short. Back there, in the light of the flames, men were racing back and forth with buckets of water from the well, sweating and cursing, looking like red devils in the glare of the fire.

Their horses, milling nervously in a bunch, were edging farther away from the burning house with every movement. And thirty yards from the house, two figures still sat their mounts. One, slightly in the rear, was a man. The other, sitting erect in the saddle, hands fastened, was Vera Trenary!

Devlin swore softly, looked down at the leather bag in his hand, at the cottonwood grove where his horse was waiting, and sighed. Deliberately he turned back, and making a wide detour so as to keep the knot of horses between himself and the house, crept up on the two figures.

The man guarding the girl had no hint of danger until his horse suddenly lunged, and a black shape leaped at him. Before he had time to utter his startled yell of warning, two hard hands snapped around his throat, shutting his windpipe, and he was dragged from his saddle.

The girl, jerking around in quick terror, saw a black arm lift up out of the struggling mass on the ground, then fall again with a thud. Then the tall figure

of Preacher Devlin straightened up, swung into the saddle of the rearing bronc, and grabbed the girl's reins.

Without a word, he lashed both animals and they plunged forward. One of the fire fighters whirled as they dashed past, then gave a hoarse shout and whipped out a gun. A dozen men dropped buckets to snatch out weapons and blaze away at the two racing figures.

Others came running from the well. Devlin jerked at the reins and changed his course. The front of the big house, as yet untouched by the fire, was only a few yards away. With that between them and that hail of lead, he and the girl could be halfway to the cottonwoods before the men rounded the building.

Then, as he cut the corner sharply, his right stirrup almost scraping the ground as he leaned with his mount, a weaving figure loomed up before him. It was Janisch. The Triangle J boss was hatless, dusty, and glaring. His guns were drawn. He stumbled aside as the two horses came swinging around the corner, and fired blindly.

Devlin's horse stumbled, lurched against the girl's racing mount, and went down. Both horses and riders piled up in a scrambling, kicking mass. Janisch was knocked a dozen feet away by a flying hoof, and he staggered up, searching feverishly for his guns, which had been knocked from his hands.

Devlin wrenched himself out from under his dead horse, and looked about him. Vera Trenary, who had been flung headlong from her saddle, was struggling to her knees, half dazed, and handicapped by her roped hands.

The gunman grabbed hold of her, and snatched up the leather bag. For just a second he stared down at the girl. Alone, he could hold that howling pack of wolves off with his gun long enough to reach the cottonwoods and his horse.

Burdened with her, in her half-dazed condition, and clad in that telltale light-colored dress, there wasn't a chance of getting down there to the little grove without one or both of them getting riddled.

For the second time that night, the tall gunman sighed, then, with the girl in his arms, ducked and sprang up onto the porch and through the doors, as the first of the gunhands came streaking around the house. A half dozen slugs ripped into the door posts behind him. Setting the girl down in the wide hall, he dropped the grip and wheeled about, a long, blue-steel gun barrel poking from each hand.

A BUNCH of Janisch gunhands came bounding onto the porch, shooting as they advanced. Like wolves diving in for the kill, each was anxious to be the first to topple the ace gunman, to be able to brag that his gun had brought down the notorious fighter.

They had Devlin—the mighty Preacher Devlin—at bay, cornered in a burning building that would soon be hotter than the gates of hell he was soon to enter! Howling like maniacs, they came on, fanning their guns with calloused palms, eager to pour lead into that big, black-clad figure.

Then from the dark hall came a stabbing spurt of flame, then another—and another. Belching their death warrants, the long gun barrels of Preacher Devlin roared their crashing tattoo. Above the barking guns, two slitted gray eyes glinted like chips of ice.

In the face of that blasting stream of lead, the mad rush of the gunhands became a wild scramble for cover. Men leaped out of the line of fire and over the low railing. Others dragged themselves painfully away. A few remained where they had dropped.

Devlin kicked the heavy doors shut as a fresh bunch streamed around the corner, heading for the porch. Slugs tore through the panels and flung splinters over the wide-brimmed black hat. He backed down the hall, pushing the girl behind him.

Glancing over his shoulder, he could see the reflection of flames dancing on the wall. They came from an open doorway on the other side of the hall. The air was thick with acrid smoke, and more

was pouring through the cracks in the heat-warped wall boards.

Waves of heat came from the rear of the house. The fire was rapidly spreading from room to room, licking hungrily at the dry timber. Only a question of time now before the whole place became a bonfire.

The gunman grinned crookedly. "Sure got holed up in a hot spot this time!"

With swift, steady hands he reloaded his heavy guns, slipped them away under the long black coat, and pulled out a short knife. As he cut the girl's bonds from her wrists, he looked down into the white blur of her face.

"Scared, girl?" he asked quietly.

Before she could answer, Janisch's voice came from outside.

"Devlin! Kin yuh hyar me? I want the gal an' thet bag! Send her out with it, then come out yourse'f—with yore hands high. Ef yuh don't, we'll spike the doors an' hold yuh both in thar to roast!"

Devlin looked down at the girl again. Vera could not see the regret on his hard features, nor the hint of pity in his eyes, but when he spoke, she sensed them in his voice.

"Take the bag, girl, an' go on out," he said gently. "I'll follow later—but not with my hands high. An' I'll take Janisch down with me when I drop. That young Gill Gallagher"—his voice had lost its customary harshness—"is pretty much of a man, and a stayer. He'll be coming after you, and you'll be safe again before you know it. Go ahead, Vera Trenary—take this bag and go, while there's time."

The girl's hand reached out and touched one of his, "No," she said steadily. "I'm not going! I owe you a debt, Preacher Devlin, and I'm going to pay it. Give me one of your guns, then go out to Janisch. Tell him he must give you five minutes in which to get away. When I'm sure you are clear, I'll come out, if I'm still alive, and he can have the bag and—and me!"

The gunman backed a pace, and stared at her. Then he gave a low chuckle. "That changes my mind about that two-thousand-dollar investment of mine! But —I don't aim to cash in on the returns."

His eyes went over her head to regard the rear of the hall. Flames had begun to burst through the boards. A crash sounded as a floor caved in somewhere.

"Wait here," he said suddenly, and darted to the foot of the wide staircase.

Janisch's voice sounded again. "What yuh say, Devlin? Send the gal an' thet bag out hyar, or—"

"I'm thinkin' it over!" Devlin called back, and disappeared up the stairs.

In two minutes he was back, his eyes red rimmed from the stinging smoke. He was brushing sparks from something he carried. It was a blanket. He wrapped it about the girl, covering her carefully from head to foot.

"Now," he said. "We're both going out—maybe! But not through the front."

HE pulled his black hat well down over his eyes, picked up the bundled girl in his arms, and started for the rear. A wave of heat greeted him as he passed the first door. Steadily he stalked on, through the thick smoke, his eyes streaming with smarting tears, his throat raw and parched, until he came to the first bend.

Beyond was nothing but flames and blackened timbers. Devlin stared at the sight for an instant. He was going through that smoking hell, banking his own life and that of the girl on his ability to make it. Banking, too, that Janisch and all his men would now be clustered around the front of the house, waiting for him to accept their terms.

With one last, lung-searing breath, he lunged forward, head held low to shield his eyes from the terrific heat, and holding the blanketed girl close to him in both arms. Half a dozen strides, and he was surrounded by flaming walls and ceiling. The charred floor gave way under his weight, and he tripped to his knees as he hit solid earth underneath.

Blindly, his face buried against the blanket, he charged forward. A blackened timber, tilted across his path, snapped as his shoulder struck it.

Whirled around by the impact, he lifted aching, bloodshot eyes to peer about for an instant, then hurled himself on.

Again he struck an obstacle, head foremost. A quick glimpse showed it to be a burning wall. He drew back, crashed a foot against it, and two of the boards fell in. He widened the opening with another kick, and plunged through. His skin felt as though it was cracking under the heat. Every breath was an agony.

Then, through the smoking ruins, stars showed through a gaping hole just ahead of him. Above him the ceiling sagged, its middle supported only by one remaining wooden pillar that, burned half through, was slowly buckling under the strain. Reeling on his way, Devlin tripped over an obstacle in his path and fell heavily against the beam. It toppled with a crash. The ceiling sagged in, hung for an instant, then gave way.

Something struck the big man heavily on the head, and he went down, half buried under the shower of flaming débris that crashed about him. Fighting down the black unconsciousness that sought to envelope him, shaking his bleeding head like a wounded bull, he struggled to his feet.

Still holding the girl, he swayed, caught his balance, and staggered on. He opened his tortured eyes, then, as cool wind fanned his face, and dazedly looked about him. He was in the open. Dimly he saw ahead of him a low building.

It was the wagon shed. He made for it, reeling like a drunken man, blood streaming down his smoke-blackened face from the gash on his head. A dozen yards, and his legs buckled under him. He pitched forward.

The girl rolled from his arms and fought herself clear of the blanket, gasping for breath. Quickly she looked about her. Almost unbelievingly, she stared back at the smoking furnace through which the big gunman had crashed his way, bearing her, unscathed, into the open.

Devlin slowly got to his knees, weaving, trying to shake his head clear of the numbing paralysis that clogged him. Vera grasped his shoulder, tugged desperately with all her frail strength to raise the tall, heavy form. The gunman muttered something, and managed to stagger up.

An astonished yell sounded behind them, then the crack of a shot. As though a challenge had called him back from the black pit of unconsciousness into which he was falling, the battered head of Preacher Devlin jerked up, red-rimmed eyes gleaming.

Stumbling around, his hands automatically swept under the long coat and out again in one unhalting movement. A heavy gun was in each fist. He fired once, then, with the girl in the lead, turned and staggered on to the wagon shed. He barely got through the doorless opening when he pitched face down again, and lay motionless.

Vera Trenary snatched up the big guns from his limp hands, darted a quick look through the doorway, and fired at the crowd of men who, with the big, bony figure of Janisch in the lead, came racing around from the front of the burning house.

A man fell, clutching his leg. The rest scattered, flopped behind anything that offered cover, and began to pour a whining hail of lead into the wagon shed.

The girl, lying flat on the ground, fired again through a wide crack in the wall. Well she knew that if the attackers were to suspect that Preacher Devlin was down, and had only a girl to face, they would be inside the shed in a moment. She fired at a crawling figure, and missed. One or two more such misses, and they would know that it was not Devlin who was behind those guns!

ABOVE her, bullets were ripping through the flimsy walls of the structure. She caught a glimpse of three figures snaking their way off to the left, for a flank movement. Her fingers pressed both triggers twice, and one of the men gave a howl.

Another knot of men suddenly leaped up, ran forward a few paces, and flopped again. The girl cut loose at them with

three more shots—and missed. Beside her, Devlin stirred as the last of her shots rang out, and laboriously propped himself up on one elbow.

"Save—your—shots!" he muttered.

Vera sent a hopeful look of relief toward him. A window, high up on the wall, allowed a flickering red glare from the fire to enter the shed. The face of the gunman, smoke-blackened and bloody, was a ghastly sight—far more so than it had been back there on the desert trail from *Plaza des Diablos*—yet now she had no thought of shrinking from him.

She looked out through the crack again. The top of a high-crowned hat moved behind a small heap of rocks. She sent two shots at it. The light was tricky, and the hat remained there. Then the voice of Janisch sounded.

"Thet ain't Devlin shootin', boys! It's the gal—an' she's done emptied her guns with them last two shots! Rush thet shed!" He leaped up from behind the rocks, and rushed forward.

His men jumped up from cover, vengeful, lusting for a kill, and followed.

Vera Trenary gasped, and jerked her triggers. The hammers clicked down on empty shells.

"Give—me them—guns!" Devlin muttered, his right hand clawing under the long coat for his cartridge belt. He was on his knees, swaying.

Then, from the doorway, Janisch's voice rasped: "No yuh don't, Devlin!"

The face of the Triangle J boss was a mask of gloating triumph as he held his guns aimed at the head of the man who had broken his prestige in Sweetwater, who had battered him down, taken his stored-up loot, fired his ranch-house.

"Yuh've fired yore l a s t shot, Preacher!" he grated. "I'm goin' ter kill yuh!" He laughed, his long face sinister. "Preacher Devlin—shot down like a mangy dawg, in a wagon shed! Thet'll shore tickle a helluva lot o' gents, up an' down the border!"

His light eyes, scanning the bloody face for a sign of fear, narrowed viciously as they saw instead the look of calm contempt.

"I always figured," Devlin said slowly, "I'd die with my boots on. But I had a notion the killin' would be done by a man—not a bushwhacking, woman-fighting coyote."

Jefe Janisch snarled like a mad dog. His men, standing behind him, were silent. His fingers tightened on his triggers.

Then, without warning, a fusillade of shots burst out. They came from the western slope of the hill. The men behind Janisch whirled with startled curses, and dashed for cover, firing, as they ran, at a party of horsemen that stormed up the slope.

Janisch swung around, glaring, then turned back to finish Devlin. A heavy pistol, thrown desperately by the girl, caught him full in the face, and he staggered back with a howl of pain and crazy rage.

Gill Gallagher, at the head of the storming riders, jumped from his horse as he reached the shed, hit dirt running, and bounded through the doorway. He almost ran into Janisch. For a split-second, the two men glared into each other's eyes.

Both had guns drawn. Both fired simultaneously. Gill was thrown half around by the force of the bullet that raked his ribs. Janisch straightened upright, shot through the middle, screamed like a scared woman, and fell backward. For a few seconds he writhed on the ground, then was silent and still.

Outside, the horsemen, comprised of Devlin's hired men, and a dozen citizens of Sweetwater who had thrown in with Gill during the brief fight outside the jail house, waged a furious battle with the Triangle J gunhands.

Mounted, they had the advantage, and, knowing that they would be doomed men if they lost this battle for the freedom of Sweetwater Valley, they fought like savages, asking no quarter and giving none. Janisch's men had no chance to take cover, nor to reach their horses.

Running, dodging, firing desperately, they were ridden down, shot, and trampled under the shod hoofs. Soon the fight

became a wild rout, with men afoot plunging in headlong flight. A barking, staccato tattoo sounded from the wagon shed, and a tall, black-clad figure stumbled forth behind a brace of blazing, jerking guns.

Inside the ranch-house of the Double Arrow, Devlin looked at Gill Gallagher, then at Vera Trenary. The edge of a white bandage showed beneath the broad brim of his hat. His face still pale and drawn from loss of blood, Gill stood leaning against the table. The girl stood beside him.

The gunman nodded toward the leather bag that he had just thrown onto the table.

"You'll find some right interestin' things in that bag," he said quietly. "Enough cash left to pay for all the cattle Janisch stole from you, for one thing. For another, there's a bill o' sale on the Double Arrow, an' a bill for two thousand dollars, marked 'Paid.' They're both signed with the name"—his hard mouth twitched in a smile—"of Preacher Devlin!"

He moved to the door, and looked back at their radiant faces. His strange eyes were gentle. "Be good to yourselves, you two, and—*adios*."

Outside, the black thoroughbred, fully saddled and waiting, stamped an impatient hoof, then cocked ears as the door opened.

He nickered as a deep, familiar voice said: "All right, *compadre*—let's start travelin'."

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HELL'S RECRUIT

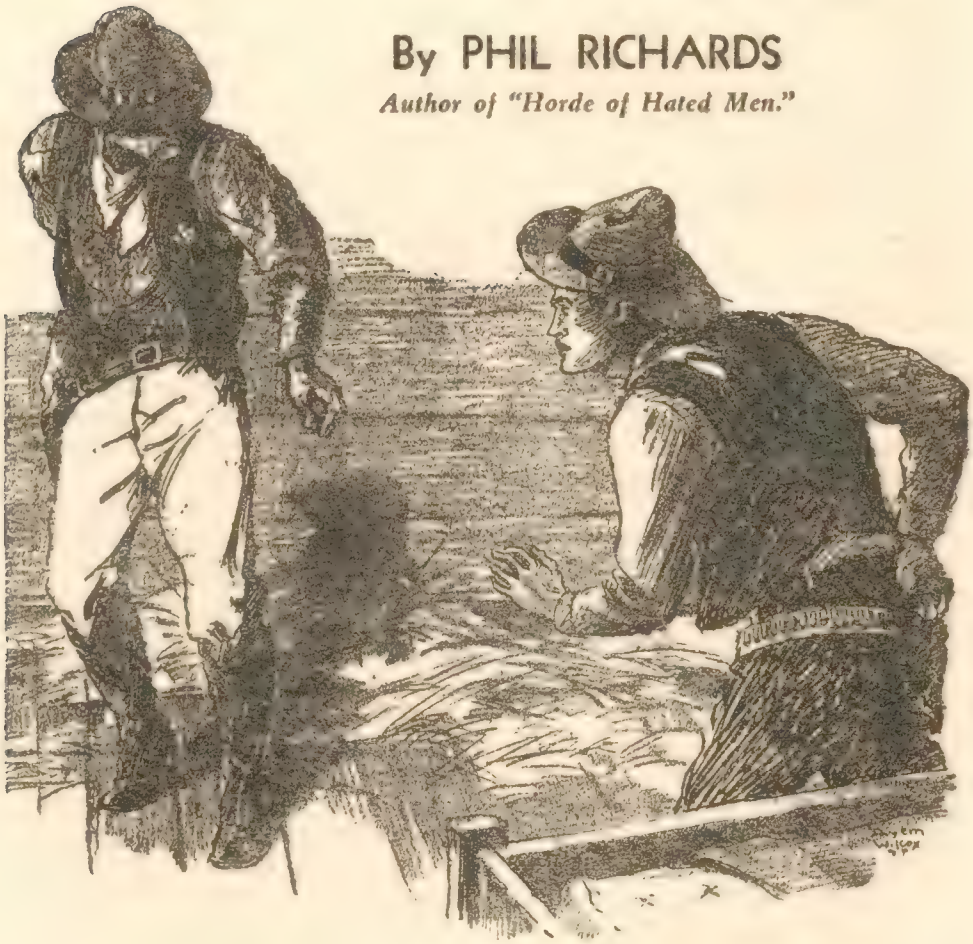
"He's Kid Calvert—the killer!" Terry cried.

Eagle Hawn, ace bank robber, swore he'd never tell the secret of his million-dollar cache. Terry Reynolds, girl sheriff of Deadline, trapped Hawn. And the law went to work on him. Down from the north of Deadline swooped young Kid Calvert and his gunhawk Horde. They, too, wanted Hawn's secret. Out of the crimson-drenched hills below the Line rode the loot-hungry Morales. And his kill-crazy bandido crew outnumbered both the law and Calvert's Horde. Eagle Hawn diced with love, hate, and death—while hell welcomed its newest recruit.

"Kid Calvert" Novel of Owl-hoot Romance

By PHIL RICHARDS

Author of "Horde of Hated Men."



CHAPTER I

EAGLE HAWN

THE cell was splattered like a butcher's chopping block. Men snarled like wolves closing in on a kill. They snarled in hate, but they swore in admiration, for the prisoner was taking a manhandling that would have lowered a shopkeeper into his coffin. The prisoner was sopping up that merciless punishment with a fixed smile on his puffed and bleeding lips, and without a sound of protest.

Four men were working on "Eagle" Hawn. Four men were sweating and puffing at the brutal business, but they weren't getting results. Another man, the age of Hawn, young, clear eyed and as fresh and spirited as a range colt, watched the slaughter with mounting disgust.

"Kid" Calvert—Calvert of the Horde—was a blood brother of violence. He was the leader of the Horde—a clan of owl-hoot gents who had been driven onto the death's-end trails by crooked law and injustice.

They were harsh, embittered men, those gunhawks, held together by the

code of the Horde, a code that pledged them to the cause of the underdog. Fate had blasted their illusions, had steeped them in hate.

The Kid was not the sort to look upon a hellion with the eye of sympathy, and Hawn was a hellion who had ridden a trail of misery and ruin. Yet the Kid felt his flesh creep at the savagery. His eyes filled with pity. He muttered and shook his head at the man's stamina.

The Kid wanted to stop this nightmare of brutality. Yet justice restrained him. Eagle Hawn was staggering like a day-old calf. His face had been smashed until it looked like raw beef. His eyes were swollen, his cheeks gashed.

Crimson drooled from his mouth, trickled from his ears, spouted from his nose. He was a wreck, an animated mass of pulped flesh. Yet he smiled, and somehow that smile got across the idea that Hawn wasn't licked.

The Kid kept starting forward, fists cocked, to sledge into these hate-inflamed sluggers. They were burly townsfolk drafted by Deputy Root. They rode the saddle of the law the Kid so often bucked. And Eagle Hawn was a citizen of the lawless trails, a brother of the owl-hoot.

No—not brother. Half-brother. The difference lay in the codes by which they lived. Eagle Hawn was not a killer. Seldom was he known to pack shooting irons. Yet his nimble fingers and highly tuned ear had caused banks to close, had turned stores into rat's nests, had driven small ranchers to the wall.

That was why the Kid couldn't stop this mangling, flesh-ripping third degree. The Kid had killed. Men had dropped before his smoking guns, but the Kid had never dealt pain and disaster save to those who deserved it. He was an outlaw, because cruel circumstance had made him so. He would remain an outlaw, because the barrier of misunderstanding would never crumble. But the Kid who violated book law, daily and deliberately, answered humbly to the higher law of humanity.

Eagle Hawn had violated that law by looting banks of the golden eagles that had earned him his nickname. Twice he had rifled the Cattlemen's Bank in Deadline. Too wily to be caught at his work, he had tangled with the law on a night he had dropped into town for pleasure.

The prisoner's bank operations had made him wealthy. Everyone knew that. But no one knew where he cached his plunder. In that cache was centered the hopes of hundreds who were victims of Hawn's skill and daring. That was why Deputy Root was using all the tricks of persuasion to make Hawn talk. That was why Kid Calvert couldn't interfere.

Deputy Root was a bull of a man, who once had killed an owl-hoot gent with a single smash of his hairy fist. An importation from Montana, he was as hard as flint, incorruptible, as relentless as a mousing cat.

Now he swore helplessly. Three times nature had rebelled, and they had revived Eagle Hawn with fiery liquor. Each time Root had pleaded with Hawn. Root had no sentiment for owl-hooters, though he all but weeped as he begged the prisoner to open up. He tried to bribe Hawn with the promise of leniency.

His booming threats would have shriveled most men's vitals. He fashioned a hangman's knot and clubbed Hawn with it, promising a swift trial and a swifter dispatch through a gallows' drop. Hawn smiled cold defiance.

They couldn't hang the smooth blackguard. Men went into eternity for lesser crimes. But Hawn's death would seal the secret of his plunder cache.

Dropping his fists, Deputy Root stared in awe at Hawn. The lawman's huge frame trembled. Finally he grinned at his own helpless rage. In his eyes the Kid saw a gleam that suggested a grudging admiration for the prisoner. The officer swore savagely and shook his head. It was an indirect admission that the battered, defiant outlaw had him beat.

SCOWLING, Root paced up and down the cell. His body was strangely tense as he peered out the barred win-

dow. He looked at Hawn again, growled, and kicked at the bunk. On a small, rough-hewn table lay a worn deck of cards—Hawn's property. He called it his good-luck pack. Few gamblers would let him use the cards, for the backs were decorated with a peculiar Aztec design, which aroused suspicion that Hawn could read them face down.

Deep in thought, Root picked up the cards, shuffled them, and began laying out a row for solitaire. "I can't lambast the truth out o' the critter," he muttered, "but there's some way o' learnin' where that dinero is buried."

The bank robber had come out of his punch fog. His poise made the bruisers gawk. Leaning against the cell wall, he gazed at the lawman, his look half sardonic, half amused. Mechanically Root was filling out the suits in the deck, while he mumbled.

"Keep your mind on the game, lawman," said Hawn, grinning contemptuously. "You don't win by playing a spade on your diamonds."

Rage rumbled in Root's throat. He threw the cards on the table and whirled. "Ain't yuh got a lick o' decency, Hawn? Come on, jaw-whack a little information. Where's that dinero? Hell, man, yore thievin' has driven folks to suicide."

Hawn shook his head. The Kid found himself staring in wonderment. Physical punishment couldn't break Hawn's will. He had quick come-back powers. He looked like a wreck, but his legs were steady, his eyes clear. He sauntered to the table, began gathering up the cards.

"You've got me wrong, Root," he said coldly. "I'm an artist, not a killer. I follow this work because the eagles on the goldpieces screech for me to come and get them. I rob banks because they were made for me to break into, but I don't drive people to suicide."

His manner was insolent and contemptuous. Root couldn't stand his superior air. The deputy uttered a roar and lunged for Hawn, lashing out with all his crushing power. The bank robber dropped the cards, tried to cover. But Root got through to the jaw, and Hawn went spinning. The others closed in.

They didn't reach the prisoner. The rough stuff had failed. The Kid couldn't let this brutality go on. He got between Hawn and his tormentors. Side-stepping a blind bull rush, the Kid grabbed a bruiser by the arm and hurled him against the opposite wall. He tripped the second strong-arm gent, and blocked Root's deadly onslaught.

Astonishment checked Root. He stared bewilderedly. Anger carved harsh lines in the Kid's face, tightened his mouth to a gash. His eyes were cold, challenging. His fighting stance warned the others away. Those tremendous shoulders suggested bone-shattering strength. The slim, tapering build indicated cougarish speed.

The Kid had volunteered to help get the truth out of the safecracker, and Root had invited him to come along, after sizing up his muscular build. Now the deputy began to splutter. The Kid cut him short.

"Yuh've flopped," he said sharply. "Now let me handle this jasper."

Root scowled at the Kid. "What do yuh think yuh can do?"

The Kid motioned for him to keep still, and faced the bank robber. "Hawn, yuh look all man to me. I know there's no use handlin' yuh like a booze-soaked border rat. Mebbe yuh don't know the misery an' hell yore thievin' has caused."

Hawn sneered. "Don' try the sob stuff on me, mister. I rob the rich. The skunks I relieve of dinero would knife their best friends to pile up the simoleons. I'm jest a little more open about my business."

The Kid frowned. "That's yore idea, is it? Only rob the rich, huh? A while back yuh busted in the bank at Wolf Paw. The bank closed, an' a little old lady lost her life's savings. The Widow Barnes, she is. Folks found her starvin' to death. She had a nice little nest egg. Now she's on charity, keepin' alive on scraps people dole out."

"Yeah? The Widow Barnes, huh?" said Hawn. "Hm-m-m. Where's the old dame

live? I'll fix 'er up with wood an' victuals. Send her some fancy duds, too."

The Kid gritted his teeth, growled. This gent was full of answers. But the Kid hadn't played his ace yet. And that ace was "Blade" Morales, a mad spic whose band of kill-crazy peons rode terror through the land. Morales was heading in—after Hawn. The Kid knew that once before the *bandido* had caught the bank robber.

"Made up yore mind to keep mum, huh?" said the Kid harshly. "Well, there's one man who'll make yuh wag yore tongue. He won't handle yuh so gentle, Hawn. Morales is headin' in. He wants yuh, mister. He wants all that dinero yuh've been collectin'."

HAWN gave a sudden start. The look of a hunted animal came into his eyes. He swallowed hard, shrank back. Then he gazed shrewdly at the Kid. He smiled in disbelief. Once more his expression grew contemptuous.

"Come again, mister. I don't fall for that trick. Morales is—" He stopped. Fear returned to his eyes. The deputy was nodding.

"That's right, Hawn," said Root. "Morales is comin'." He scowled at the Kid. "How the hell did yuh learn that?"

"Never mind," said the Kid coldly.

He wasn't telling about the hermit men scattered through the hills. Befriended by the Horde, these gents of solitude—prospectors, wood-choppers, trappers—often brought news to the owl-hooters from long distances. From them the Kid had learned about Morales.

The Kid whirled Hawn. He pulled up the bank robber's shirt, exposing his bare back. Men gasped, blinked their eyes, and gasped again. On Hawn's back was a great welted criss-cross of angry red scars where once the flesh had been cooked.

"Morales' little job," said the Kid grimly. "Hawn wouldn't talk for the spic, so he got branded. Not with a runnin' iron, men. A white-hot axle made these marks!"

Root turned gray at the sight of those hideous scars. He swore and sprang to the window. "God, if Morales gets here before—" His teeth were grinding. His eyes were wild. "Hawn, listen to reason! If Morales gets yuh, he'll hack yuh to pieces to make yuh talk."

A shudder went the length of Hawn's lithe frame. The name of Morales was enough to inspire fear in any man. The spic had begun his career as a cobbler's apprentice. He had knifed his employer and robbed his savings, using the money to gather a small band of tattered laborers. For years Morales had been shuttling back and forth over the border, sacking villages. He rode a fear trail that the law seldom dared to cross.

"Hell's fire!" exclaimed Root. "This town is turnin' into a headquarters for drygulchers. First that murderin' pack in the hills—that Calvert Horde. An' now Morales!"

The deputy didn't see the glare that the Kid shot him. Calvert's Horde would be forever maligned and reviled, and yet it was the strongest agency for peace and protection in the county.

There was a greenish tinge to Hawn's bruised face. The mention of Morales drained him of arrogance. He licked his split lips. He ran a trembling hand through his hair.

"I've got to act quick." Root was talking to himself. "I've got to loop me an idea before the girl comes back."

The Kid tensed, eyed the deputy strangely.

Hawn came forward and clutched the deputy's arm. He was fighting for control, but his face was haggard. "Root, you got to get me out of here. I won't sell out to the law. I'll never tell where I've got my cache. But you can't let that greaser get me. Morales has me licked. I admit it. He tried everything to make me yammer. An' when I wouldn't talk, he branded me, left me on the desert to die."

Hawn gritted his teeth. "I can't go through it again, Root. If Morales gets me this time, I'm finished. But even if Morales takes me apart piece by piece, he'll learn exactly nothing."

The men had been so absorbed in Hawn's talk, that they hadn't heard the footsteps in the corridor. Suddenly a girl's voice swung them around. The Kid felt as though his blood was freezing. Terry! Terry had returned, and the sound of her voice numbed him. He pulled down his hat, lowered his head, sidled into the corner. His heart hammered. Cold sweat bathed his body. He knew he was trapped.

Terry Reynolds, sheriff of Washakie County, was the Horde's greatest foe and a person beloved by every slit-eyed gunslick in it. The Kid worshipped the girl. And now, with Morales riding in, she was in danger.

When Blade Morales cut loose with his hell guns, everything in front of him went down. If the girl fell before the peon's smoking sixes, the Kid would live thereafter for the sole purpose of dealing vengeance. With Terry gone, life for the Kid would be smothered by everlasting night.

The girl stepped into the cell. She seemed just a wisp of daintiness, but the steady gaze of her midnight eyes, the angle of her spunky jaw hinted of the steel that was in her nature. Washakie County had swept her into the sheriff's office with an avalanche of votes. But she held the office because of principle and not for preference.

She had vowed to carry on the work of her father, the old sheriff who had lost his life defending the law in Washakie County, who had fallen in the same battle that had robbed the Kid of his outlaw father, "Gunner" Calvert. When the girl had taken the oath of office, she had sworn to round up Calvert's Horde with hangman's rope.

Despite his danger, the Kid was overwhelmed by fascination. She was truly beautiful, with golden hair and loveliness in the delicate contour of her oval face. She was sturdy. She had the stamina of a frontierswoman. Yet she had a deer's grace, and to the Kid she seemed all clinging softness. He had known the maddening caress of those red lips. He had experienced the ecstasy of her warm embrace. And he had faced her withering woman's scorn, too.

The girl had eyes only for the battered prisoner. Those eyes flashed angrily. Her slender body quivered. Rage heightened the color under her bronze, mirrored hidden fires in her eyes. Her loveliness reached its peak under the stress of emotion. The Kid's heart hammered.

So often was he on the lonely outtrails, so often was he buffeted in angry storms of hate and violence, that the sight of Terry Reynolds nearly made him swoon with a torturing blend of pain and happiness.

"Mr. Root," the girl cried, "you've deliberately gone against my orders. That poor man! Five against one. How could you be so cruel? We're trying to stamp out brutality in Washakie County. We're not fostering it. Five against—"

Her eyes swept the group, and stopped on the Kid. For a moment incredulity tied her tongue. The Kid tried desperately to hide in the shadows. He crowded against the wall. His chin dug into his chest. He heard Terry gasp. Her foot scuffed the floor. Her hand slapped to the businesslike holster.

"Kid Calvert!" she cried. "Root! Get him! He's Kid Calvert—the killer!"

CHAPTER II

Decoy

THEY swung around, went for their guns. The Kid's hand didn't move until their guns were half from the leather. Then there was a pop as his fingers hit the holster, and in a split-second he was behind a black bore that threatened to spout hell.

Deputy Root swore. His three bruisers shrank back. Fear put them out of the deal. Root showed that he had the impulse to bull into the Kid, but that menacing Colt persuaded him to let discretion govern his actions.

Suddenly Eagle Hawn lunged. He threw himself at the girl. As he catapulted across the floor, he swooped up his pack of playing cards. The girl was no tenderfoot on the draw, but indeci-

sion and surprise had made her fumble. Now as she whipped the .45 from the holster, it was to have Hawn snake out a long arm and snatch it from her grasp.

Then the bank robber sprang from the cell. The Kid was glad he was gone. Now the safecracker could get into the hills, away from the menace of Blade Morales.

The men in the cell raised their hands. They didn't know that the Kid was pulling a gun bluff. He would fight. He would burn powder, but he wouldn't shoot any of them.

"Yo're right reasonable, gents," the Kid spoke harshly. "I sure ain't a jasper to crowd when I got the business end of a hogleg focused on anyone. Now lift those Colts gently, an' toss 'em through the window."

Very carefully each hooked the trigger guard with the index finger of his closed gunhand, and flipped his Colt through the bars. The Kid grunted approval. Root was clenching and unclenching his hands, but he wasn't stepping forward. The Kid crab-walked toward the door. Suddenly he grabbed the girl by the arm and whisked her out of the cell. He turned the key in the lock, withdrew it.

The girl's eyes were filled with fury and hurt. The Kid interpreted the expression as one of loathing. A great sadness descended upon him. He holstered his gun and urged her along. His head was light, dizzy, and he thought that a leaden weight lay where his heart should be.

He loved this girl more than life. She was very close, yet as far beyond his reach as the moon. A mountain of misunderstanding towered between them. The Kid's ideals and principles soared as high as hers, but his were smudged by outlawry and rebel deeds.

He knew that the girl wanted to believe in him, had tried to see his side; but always circumstances had blocked the way to understanding. She was hating him now. The Kid felt sure of it. He got a sliver of consolation out of the thought that her hate actually was love melted in the fires of fury.

They were halfway down the corridor before the Kid could speak. "Terry, you must believe me," he pleaded. "I came here to help Root with Eagle Hawn. I didn't mean to let him get away."

The girl's lips curled in an ironical smile. "Always ready with an explanation, aren't you?"

Her tone stung him like a whip. Knots of muscle stood out on the Kid's jaw. Silently he cursed himself for being a weakling and the kind of a fool who would try to crumble a stone wall with his fists. He was a rider of the owl-hoot. If he stayed on the lawless trails, he could avoid much of the misery that now plagued his spirit. It is when a man is able to compare that he is unhappy with his lot.

The Kid's love for Terry had given him but a few flashes of happiness in a never-ending darkness of pain. She was not for him. He had to forget her. That should be easy for a man who lived so dangerously, who seldom had time to think of himself.

Then he looked at her again, and his resolution was swept away. Her face was set, her mouth tight. But mist filled her dark eyes. She had dropped the rôle of sheriff. She was just a little girl in the throes of deep emotion, valiantly fighting back the tears.

The Kid felt a great surge of tenderness. He knew then that he would never forget her, knew that it was for him to face her scorn and fury, asking nothing but the chance to help her, to give her the protection that only a gunslick from the owl-hoot could provide.

Suddenly he came upon a great revelation. It wasn't being loved that mattered. He realized how that life, which had cheated him of so much, had given him man's most vital heritage—someone who needed him. Never mind the barrier.

Terry truly needed him. Her black eyes admitted what her lips would deny. What chance had a girl, backed by a few deputies whose fists were speedier than their brains, against the brutality that stalked across this raw frontier land?

She had a courage that transcended the bravery of strong men. But life had equipped her for the home, not for the wild manhunt trails.

The Kid saw clearly now. The Horde was her guardian, the Kid her protector. He vowed that always would he be somewhere near. He knew now that being loved or hated didn't matter—as long as a man obeyed the dictates of his conscience. The important thing was loving; the important thing was for a man to realize that he was needed.

"TERRY!" The Kid's voice was vibrant with the emotion that swelled his heart. Scarcely aware of the act, he reached out to draw her close. His thoughts had mellowed him. His thoughts had strengthened him with the knowledge that he could take any rebuke or lash of scorn with head high.

The spell had caught the girl. She swayed toward him, her eyes closed, her jaw quivering. But the touch of his hand broke the magic of that moment when love had risen above all the complexities of their lives. Her body tensed. She sprang back. Again fury was her master.

"I hate you!" she cried. "You came to free Eagle Hawn. You came to oppose my fight to keep law and order. You threatened my deputy. You would have killed innocent men. Yet you plead for understanding. Yes, I understand. I understand that you are a killer. If I get away from you this time, Kid Calvert, I promise to fight you and the Horde until the last of your hateful band is gone!"

The time had been when those words would have ripped into the Kid's soul. They would have shriveled his spirit, driven him onto the lonely trails feeling as though his life was an endless shame.

Now he merely shook his head and smiled at her. That smile, too, was misunderstood. She thought he was flaunting his contempt. She edged near him and her hand flashed for his gun. The Kid grabbed her wrist and tightened his grip until she released her hold on the butt. He was still mellow, and he smiled again.

"You smug hellion!" the girl spoke angrily. "You know there is nothing I can do. But if I had a gun—if I had a gun, Kid Calvert, you'd surrender or I'd use lead to save the county the cost of hanging you."

They had reached the front door of the jail. The Kid's magnificent steel-dust stallion was ground-anchored outside. Clean limbed and deep barreled, Star was the Kid's inseparable companion on the owl-hoot.

He handed her the key to the cell upstairs. "Yuh'd better get those jaspers out before they begin wreckin' the furniture, Terry. Yuh don't need to worry about Eagle Hawn. He's a plumb upstandin' ranny, but I agree he hasn't any right buryin' gold where it can't draw interest. I'll bring him back, Terry—me an' the Horde. An' we'll try to bring the dinero along, too."

"I don't doubt that," the girl answered scornfully. "You'll get the money—not the folks who really own it."

"Terry, if the Horde was as bad as yuh think, we could control votes, get a whack of the profits out of every business, run all the saloons, honkatonks, an' gamblin' hells, an' ramrod the whole state.

"Why, girl, there's hardly a gunhawk from border to border who hasn't tried to get into the Horde. But we want no truck with thieves an' drygulchers. We steal an' we kill, but the hombres who suffer from us sure deserve their sufferin'."

Suddenly a fear-laden cry blared across the town.

"Morales is ridin' in!"

The Kid swung around. Hoofs were drumming in from the west. A cloud of dust streaked across the flats. He lowered into a fighting crouch, hand on gun.

Out of the smoking dust loomed a band of sombreroed riders led by a squatty, shapeless mass of evil forking a beautiful, spirited black mount. Even from the distance the Kid could see the splendor of the man's garb. The most dash-

ing caballero in all Mexico would have been proud to wear such finery. But on the squat, bulky Blade Morales the costly fabrics interwoven with gold braid were wrinkled and sodden.

The bandido was entering town with a bewildering crash of gunfire. Down on the main street citizens were scurrying for cover.

Blade Morales reined his fiery bronc, and headed straight for the jail, his cut-throat crew thundering along in his dust. The Kid's face grew harsh. He knew what would happen if the peon found that Hawn had escaped. The lid of hell would pop off in Deadline. Morales would turn into a gun-blazing, knife-slinging maniac.

THE bank robber was a rich prize for Blade Morales. When the savage peon, who should have been born with fangs and cloven hoofs, learned that the safecracker was gone, he would lay the blame to Terry Reynolds. The men in the second-story cell would be slaughtered. If Morales didn't kill the girl, he would carry her away.

The Kid was cold with the terrifying prospect, but his heart leaped exultantly as he realized that again Terry had need for him. The Kid couldn't stand off that pack of slavering killers. A gun challenge would make them kill crazy. He saw the one chance of saving Deadline from a massacre..

He grasped the girl's arm. "Terry—quick! Get a gun from the office. I'll fog out o' here. Yuh run from the jail, yellin' an' firin' at me. Shout the name o' Hawn. Savvy? That breed pig will think I'm Hawn. He'll think Hawn is escaping. He'll take after me, an'—"

The girl's eyes sparkled. She needed only a word. The Kid moved back into the gloom of the corridor. That howling crew of drunken spics was within Colt range. The Kid kept licking dry lips. A feverish light burned in his eyes. His hand wasn't as steady as usual. There was a chance that he would be caught between a cross-fire.

The girl had rushed into the office. She was back again, clutching a long-barreled, frontier-model Colt. The Kid's pulses were pounding. His vitals knotted up. He sagged against the wall, and horror twisted his face. Terry was leveling the six-gun at him!

Anger flushed her face. Her eyes flashed with triumph. She stepped toward the Kid, jaw grimly set. Long had she waited for this chance. Outside, hoofs pounded closer. The spics were yelling. She bit her lip. Doubt crept over her features. Her eyes shifted from the Kid to the door. Indecision furrowed her brow, and that indecision dissipated her anger. Suddenly she uttered a gasp. Alarm filled her eyes. The gun lowered.

"What am I doing?" she cried in self-reproach. "I'm insane—insane. Go—Stan! It is a risk, a desperate risk. It's not for me. But those men upstairs—and the folks in Deadline. There'll be a massacre if Morales thinks I tricked him, thinks I hid Eagle Hawn. Go, Stan boy. My heart is—is—with—"

The last word was lost as she brushed her lips against his cheek. The Kid was delirious with happiness. She had called him Stan, the name she had known him by, before she had learned that he was Calvert of the Horde. She had caressed him. In a flashing second the Kid experienced the essence of joy that is spread through many days of an ordinary man's life.

He wanted to hold her, wanted to press his lips hungrily against hers. But the thunder of hoofs sent him lunging for the door. He triggered his gun. From the corridor sounded a deafening blast.

The Kid leaped high in the air, forking his alert steel-dust mount without touching the stirrup. He gathered up the reins, nudged Star's flanks. The mount responded with a plunge and lengthened into a high lope.

The spics were howling like drunken Apaches. The girl rushed out the door, the sunlight glinting on her star. She fired after the Kid.

"Hawn! Hawn!" she yelled. "You can't get away. I'll kill you—kill you!"

Again and again she shouted the bank robber's name.

A frenzied outburst of spic oaths roared from the Morales crowd. They were ripping their horses' flanks. The squat bandido was brandishing a six-gun and cursing his men on:

"It is Hawn!" he roared in Spanish. "Ride the gringo down. Kill his horse, maim him; but I must have him alive."

CHAPTER III

The Hated Horde

THE KID heard a whine close to the stallion's flank. His scalp twitched. Those howling spics were trying to cut down his mount. A slug nipped the Kid's right boot. Shrieking through the air on an angle, a steel-jacketed bullet from a rifle sliced Star across the withers.

The mount squealed and went into the air. Dread kinked the Kid's muscles. Star would lose his footing when he landed, and the Kid would be sprawled in the sage. There were no trees or boulders to offer shelter. He would have to make a stand. One hell-roaring moment, and those spics would bullet-cut the legs from under him. It would be his evil luck not to die.

The Kid felt that his blood was clotting in his veins as the stallion hit the ground. The snorting steel-dust stumbled, started to somersault. Sure that he had made his last ride, the Kid was ready to throw his feet from the stirrups. He would land upright and give those spics a glimpse of hell before they finished him.

"Steady, boy!" the Kid spoke softly.

The words were lost in the racket, but the stallion heard the Kid's voice. It bore the note of encouragement that the frenzied mount needed. Star responded with a shrill whinny, and then the Kid knew that he had underestimated the steel-dust.

Morales was bellowing orders for his gunhogs to spread out. Then the peon began getting his words twisted. For the man on the steel-dust was still out of reach. Star had saved himself from spilling by crow-hopping. A few stiff-legged jumps restored the mount to an even stride, and now the stallion was bounding across the flats.

The spics cut loose. A bullet plucked at the Kid's sleeve. He uttered a low snarl and twisted in the saddle. He rocketed a slug in the center of that pack. A spic stiffened suddenly and toppled from the saddle. A flying hoof almost tore the man's head off.

The Kid winced. Another hoof crushed the skull. The bandits rode over their fallen brother, leaving a mangled corpse sprawled in the alkali. Often had the Kid looked upon death, but he had never grown callous to the sight of it.

The Kid bent low along Star's neck. The mount had taken the bit in his teeth, and the gap between was rapidly widening. Morales' men had ceased firing. Their mounts were taking cruel punishment.

Reaching the hills, the Kid tightened rein. On a pine-fringed crest, he drew Star to a halt and waited until the spics rode within bullet range. Then his gun hammered. He didn't fire to empty saddles, but to bait them into a fury that would keep them in pursuit.

Wild shouts answered his gun thunder. Powder smoke swirled up around the Kid's face. A hard smile split his tightened lips. He would rather be thrown to a pack of hunger-crazed wolves than to have that crew ride him down. He jammed fresh loads into his gun, and sent Star down a rock-studded draw.

The going was slow through a boulder-strewn ravine. Morales and his hirelings were in bullet range for several tense, lead-screaming miles. When the Kid struck benchland, he burned leather on a straightaway until death no longer whined close. After that, he paused often to entice Morales on, but he didn't offer the spics any more target practice.

He led them on a chase through the canyon-slashed country until the band was cut in half by wind-blown horses that had fallen. Star was brush-scarred and lathered, but the mount still showed eagerness.

Shadows were deepening when the Kid quit the game and lost the remnants of that killer pack in the rugged, tumbling land. The Kid had played with Morales deliberately to wear the Mexican out. By the time the bandit got back to Deadline, he'd be too weary to cut loose on the town.

Darkness lay over the land when the Kid reached the Horde's hideout in a pine-grown basin atop a ridge. Before he made the last climb, he was stopped by a sentry.

"Shore glad to see yuh comin' in whole, Kid," the battle-scarred veteran said. "We got word Morales was on your trail. The boys are mighty worried. Giant an' Grama sloped for Deadline with some of the boys, in case word came that Morales had got yuh."

IF the men of Calvert's Horde had the greed of the ordinary, respectable citizens who hated them so, they could amass fortunes. Yet they lived in wood-choppers' cabins. Their fare was as simple as chuck-wagon grub. They washed and mended their own clothes. A little straw in their bunks served to relieve the hardness of the pinon poles beneath.

The moment the Kid rode into the basin, the owl-hooters bounded from the cabins. The Kid dismounted, and immediately one of them led Star away to be fed and watered and curried.

"Lawdy, son, yuh shore had this old tinhorn seein' nothin' but the ace o' spades in the pack. I've been half nuts, thinkin' yuh'd crowded yore luck too far."

The speaker was an undersized man wearing a flowery vest. He had the appearance of a dude. His suit was of black broadcloth, and had the formal cut of an undertaker's clothes. A golden rowel, suspended from a nugget chain, decorated his fancy vest.

"Dandy" McLain's one extravagance was his apparel. A professional gambler clever enough to cold-deck the wiliest cardsharp, Dandy would seldom sit in a game unless he looked as though he had stepped out of a mail-order catalogue.

"Yuh ain't shot up any, are yuh, Kid?" asked Nate Willstock, a wintry-eyed veteran of the outtrails. He studied the Kid anxiously. Nate Willstock's spirit had frozen years ago, when crooked law had driven him onto the owl-hoot. Yet his eyes thawed a little as he looked at the Kid.

"By dogies!" yelled "Peel" Rogers from the cook house. "Flank down on that chin music an' come an' git it. The lad's all right. By coots, he oughta git plumb indignant, havin' a bunch o' grandmothers mooin' around him. The spic that kin handle the Kid ain't never lifted a frijole or crammed a tortilla down his brown gullet. Come on, Kid. I built yuh a Johnny-in-the-sack that'll make yuh lay back yore ears an' neigh."

"We're ridin', boys," the Kid announced later, while he was wolfing Peel's tasty grub. "Morales will be in Deadline, feelin' proddy. I tried to wear down the dirty son, so he'd be too fagged to raid the town, but if tequila takes hold o' him— I'm worried about Terry. Some of the notches on Morales' guns are for women, gents!"

Nate Willstock jumped up and knocked over his chair. "I'm saddlin'. It'd be jest like little Terry to go after Morales. I reckon I'm plumb short on sentiment, but that girl hasn't a father, an'— an'—" Willstock clumped out of the cook house.

"Gawd, if anything happened to Terry—" Dandy dropped his fork and shoved back from the table. "I'm drawin' chips in this game. How about a showdown with that greasy spic?"

"Yuh know better than that, Dandy," said the Kid. "Yuh know what a showdown in Deadline means. Plenty o' law-abidin' jaspers who came to town for a little elbow bendin' would be headed feet first toward boot hill before mornin'. We can't take a chance of innocent rannies gettin' in the way."

The Horde rode out of the hills. Into Deadline the owl-hooters fogged, into the weather-warped cowtown where the Calvert name was a curse. They sloped in

to protect men who hated them, who wanted to see the Horde snapped out of existence in a wholesale necktie party.

The Kid was a bundle of hot nerves tightened like a bowstring. He mopped sweat from his forehead, although the night was cool. As jumpy as a spooky horse, he often jerked rigid for no reason save that he was on edge. His mouth was dry, his hands cold.

He couldn't break his tenseness, because his mind was on his men. He had seen the look in their eyes, the hard smiles, the frequent caress of gun butts. The Kid clamped his jaws. They had nodded to his caution, but they were hoping that trouble would crowd them.

Could the Kid hold his men in check? Not if Colts flamed in spic hands. Abuse from honest folks didn't make them blink an eye. Citizens could revile them without end. To the townsmen the Calvert wild bunch showed the patience of an old dog with a puppy. But not with Morales. If Morales began filling the atmosphere with gunsmoke—

The law gave the Kid grave concern. Would Terry be in town? Her rare moments of tenderness for the Kid didn't lessen her determination to destroy the Horde. She had picked hell in half-boots for a deputy. Let Root learn that the Horde was in town, and he'd throw a cordon of gun-handy gents around Deadline that a fox couldn't get through.

THE racket in the Broken Spur Saloon made the Kid feel as though he had an icicle for a spine. Morales was in there. Morales was slinging gold around and slapping gents on the back. The spic's drunken guffaws rose above the din. The hitchracks were lined with tethered mounts. Plenty of men were forgetting tonight that the spiggoty had shot down women and children, had left towns charred and smoldering.

The Kid knew that when Morales was around, laughter was apt to turn suddenly to snarls. Morales was having a jovial spell. But he was as uncertain as a cat. He would claw even while he purred.

In the alley alongside the Broken Spur, the owl-hooters ground anchored their broncs. They bunched in the darkness.

"Drift in solo, gents," the Kid advised. "We're here to prevent trouble, not to start it. Side-step Morales if he's honin' for a ruckus. Humor him. Handle him like a child."

The Kid pushed through the batwing doors first. Through the tobacco fog, he saw Morales staggering from one group to another, a grinning, orey-eyed idiot sopping up cringing flattery.

With the prospect of gain, many citizens were willing to blind themselves to the spic's true character. A dozen fawning men tagged after him. A puncher stared in open-mouthed awe. That pleased the peon, who tossed the cowpoke a small buckskin sack that clinked. Some of the gents who hung too close to Morales, scraping for his favor, got shoved in the face. Now and then the spic's viciousness broke through, and men shivered.

It was easy to see why this ex-cobbler's apprentice could surround himself with killers who would ride at his command into any sort of danger. The bully had an intensity which gave him the magnetism that drew men. His amazing vitality kept him going at top speed. There was no dozing while he was around.

The Broken Spur was crowded. Men jammed shoulder to shoulder at the bar. The tables were filled. The bartenders were drenched and puffing. In the dancing annex, where burly gents galloped about with percentage dames, a spic orchestra was scraping and blowing.

Not all of the citizens were kotowing to the spic. In the mob was a sprinkling of clear-eyed gents. The town's loafers and rowdies did the cheering. The law-abiding men frowned, but were afraid to make a play. Yet they maintained their self-respect by cautiously dumping Morales' liquor in the spittoons.

A man came toward the Kid, a Hordeman who looked as mild and gentle as a deacon. He had soft brown eyes and a

smile that suggested kindliness. "Grama" Sinton was mild and gentle—until he was crossed. Then hell flamed in his heart.

The Kid and Grama elbowed through the drunken pack to the side wall where they could talk unnoticed.

"I've been thinkin' yuh was buzzard bait, lad," said Grama. "Shore did. Me an' Giant tried to sound out some of Morales' spics. No sabe. Giant is at that table in the corner."

The Kid sauntered up to Giant Anderson, a massive-shouldered gunslick with two hundred and forty pounds of fighting strength distributed over his huge frame. Nothing of the Coltman in Giant's appearance. He had a boyish cast to his face.

Though a veteran of the dim trails, he looked more like a slow-moving, well-fed farmer from the corn belt. But the only softness that Giant Anderson carried was in his heart. He had the speed of a striking rattler and the fury of a wounded grizzly when there was fighting to do.

His broad, frank face brightened. "Lawdy, pard, I'm well-nigh bugs. Every time I looked at that grinnin' spic idjit, I saw yuh stretched in a canyon with a bullet in yore head. I've been expectin' Morales to make some slip that would tell me he had killed yuh. Then I was goin' to yank out his windpipe."

"MEBBE yuh'll still get the chance, Giant," said the Kid, "because it looks like that hombre is buildin' himself up to start something. But we're not lookin' for trouble. I hope Morales drinks himself under the table."

Not much chance of that. Booze swelled the spic's conceit, but it didn't buckle his knees. The Kid's eye roved over the jostling man-pack. His Hordemen were scattered about the room, alert, waiting. Morales' blademen were circulating through the boisterous mob.

What had happened to Deputy Root? Fear didn't keep the lawman away. Maybe he was gathering a posse to nab the gunhogs when the spics reeled out of the Broken Spur.

An hour slipped by, an hour that saw many men dragged to the alley, dead drunk. Morales was still calling for drinks, and he was paying. That was a joke. The spic was making the cash drawer ring. But if the whim struck him, he would take the gold and everything that the owner had in the safe. And the number of men he killed wouldn't matter to him. It was the whim that mattered. Often men died or got suddenly rich, according to his mood.

"Dreenk, you greengo dogs!" yelled Morales, sweeping a pudgy hand over the crowd. He had just called for another round, and the bartenders were losing fat hustling the orders. "Tonight Morales love you, ever' rotten son of you. *Si!* I love you like a brother, you white rats. *Madre de Dios!* You are all my cheeldren. I—Morales—am the *bueno padre.* Dreenk, you damn peegs!"

Morales was on the verge of tears. He was gripping hands and embracing drunks. A barfly thought he saw a chance to make a stake. The Kid had seen this loafer cringing and whining around Morales. The lout annoyed the *bandido,* who had pushed him away many times. Now the barfly stepped in and circled his arm about the spic's shoulders.

Morales ground his teeth. His booze-puffed face twisted. Madness glittered in his tiny eyes. His squat, sloppy body quivered. He wriggled free of the barfly's arm, and uncorked a haymaker that drove the drunk into the mob.

The Kid started forward. He had been expecting something like this. If that barfly went for his gun— Morales was striding toward the drunk, boot raised, gunhand lifting. The Kid shot a glance to Giant Anderson. Peel and Grama were heading in behind Morales. Dandy McLain was springing onto a table. The hilarity died. Drunks were sobering, edging for the exits.

Morales' blademen were closing in. Blood would run as freely as the booze—if Morales' gun spouted hell. The spic's boot started down. The Colt was clearing leather.

Then Morales guffawed. He shrugged.

He dropped his gun into the leather, beckoned to the crowd to surge up to the bar. The tension was broken. Gents laughed hysterically. The bartenders emerged from hiding places. Glasses clinked.

"Eet ees not right that we should have the shooting when the law, he ees not een town," said Morales. "I play *bueno* treeck on *Segundo* Root. A messenger come weeth the word that trouble, she break out in Wolf Paw. And *Señor* Root ride queeck to Wolf Paw. Ha! Root, he do not know that Morales send that messenger."

"Think yo're purty damn good, don't yuh, chilli con carne? Yuh think thar ain't nothin' in the world like Morales. Yuh got 'em all buffaloed, 'ceptin' me. My name is Tucker, savvy? An' thar never was a Tucker what let a spic do anything but clean his boots."

It was the barfly talking. Rather, it was the booze getting the best of the soak. His eyes were glazed from the punch. He wobbled toward the *bandido*, groping for his six-gun. He didn't know what he was doing. The Kid tried to get to him, but others stood in the way.

"Huh?" grunted Morales. He swung on the barfly Tucker. His gun left the holster in a smooth draw. Tucker's eyes bulged with horror. The sight of that black muzzle sobered him. He cried out for mercy, raised his hands, sank toward the floor.

The gun snarled. The slug caught Tucker in the forehead. He was instantly dead, but Morales still glared with murderous intensity, his gun sweeping the crowd.

The Kid pushed forward. "Yo're spoilin' yore party, Morales," he yelled. The only way to handle this spic now was to humor him. "Yuh've been showin' us the best time we ever had. The night's young—"

"And so are you, amigo," purred Morales. "But you weel never be older. I do not lak keeds to tell me what I mus' do."

The spic's gun focused on the Kid. There was no chance of drawing against Morales. None of the Hordemen was in position to get a shot at the *bandido*. Dandy McLain had jumped from the table too soon. The Kid ran his tongue over his lips, measured his chance of kicking the gun from the spic's hand. He couldn't reach the greaser.

He was sure it was the end. He felt no fear; only a grim desire not to die. There was a chance. If Morales didn't kill him with his first bullet— The Kid's hand was moving toward his gun butt. The spic's finger was tightening on the trigger.

CHAPTER IV

The Search

THERE was a stir in the tensed crowd. The batwing doors were swinging. One of Morales' gunhogs shouted his name. The *bandido* relaxed his trigger finger, though his eyes were fixed on the Kid, whose hand paused close to his holster. A spic pushed through the mob, buzzed something in Morales' ear, something that brought a gleam to the evil little eyes.

The *bandido* muttered a name that made the Kid stiffen. Quill—Pete Quill, former deputy in Deadline, the tool of crooked interests, who had opposed Terry Reynolds in the last election. Quill had just entered the barroom. Quill was doing business with Blade Morales.

The spic showed the daring that had helped to build his reputation. He turned his back on the Kid, and pried quickly through the crowd. It was the kind of a gesture with which the *bandido* often awed the mob. He might have shot before he turned away, but sudden impulse governed him always.

The Kid felt a boundless sense of relief. Jumping on to a table, he saw Morales swagger through the swinging doors. With him went his swarm of gunhogs and a burly, red-faced man with his mouth shaped into a perpetual sneer. The Kid clenched his fists. Quill had been a lawman; now he was trafficking with the most savage raider in the country.

Dandy McLain eeled through the jab-

bering throng. The Kid jumped from the table. "I got a snatch o' the talk," said the little gambler. "Quill's been out scoutin' for Morales. Quill's learned that the jasper Morales chased wasn't Hawn. Musta found out from somebody in the jail that yuh led the spics on a blind chase."

"But what made those scuts pile out o' here?" asked the Kid.

"Because Quill saw Hawn in Deadline. An' Morales is throwin' a line o' spics around the town. No one's gettin' out or in."

The Kid's mouth tightened. "We got to beat Morales to it, Dandy. We got to nab Hawn." He stopped, scowled. "Does Quill know we're in town?"

"Didn't hear him say," replied the gambler. "But Morales is all-fired het up. His face purpled when Quill told about yuh. If Morales catches yuh, son — God, it'd be easier if yuh fell into a den of rattlers. A hell of a lot easier."

The Kid's eyes slitted. "Yeah, I know. His idea o' fun is feedin' a gent to red ants. Cuts off a man's eyelids, an' stakes him face up in the sun to go blind crazy. Yeah. But that's not goin' to stop me from huntin' for Hawn."

Peel Rogers and Grama Sinton were standing near the entrance, waiting. Giant Anderson was coming up. They started for the swing-doors.

"There's some reason why Hawn is stickin' around town, Dandy," the Kid said. "Why? Hell, he could be forty miles away. That Hawn jasper is all man—an' a gambler. Poker or banks—he's always ready to take a chance. H'm-m-m. I'd like to see him buckin' yore game some time, Dandy. Yuh've heard of his lucky cards. Hawn's never lost a game with them."

Dandy grinned. "Reckon we better find him, son. I shore hanker to bust that winnin' streak."

Outside, the Hordemen sauntered into the darkness, one by one. Already Morales and his spics had disappeared. Some of the sober gents from the barroom were packing Tucker's body to the undertaker's. Most of the men in the Broken Spur were too orey-eyed to realize that trouble was on a short fuse. Scarcely had the Horde gathered in the darkness than the racket in the saloon broke out again.

"Gents, I want this town combed down to the last rat-hole adobe for Eagle Hawn," the Kid told the owl-hooters. "Travel in pairs. If yo're spotted by Morales' men, use yore fists, do anything but shoot. Deadline's settin' on a powder keg now, an' one gunshot is liable to touch it off."

"Eagle Hawn musta gone nuts, stickin' in town," said Grama.

"Mebbe," replied the Kid. "But I'm figurin' that he's cookin' up a little deal. Hawn doesn't hit a town unless there's good pickings. What brought him to Deadline?"

Peel Rogers slapped his thigh. "By coots, that's it! The Lobo River dam. There's nigh onto five hundred men in that construction camp."

"Exactly," went on the Kid. "An' the payroll came in today. Five hundred gents averagin' five bucks a day means around seventy thousand simoleons for the monthly pay-off. An' the money's in the Cattlemen's Bank. Well, yuh see why we have to nab Hawn pronto."

Presently the Hordemen were scouring the town. The Kid climbed the drainpipe to the roof of the three-story Deadline Hotel.

There he had a view of the town and the surrounding flats. Dandy had got his information right. Beyond the skirts of the town, horsemen were walking their mounts back and forth. Not a chance of a man getting through that cordon. The spics were far enough from the houses so a sniper couldn't pick them off. The Kid searched for Morales, but nowhere along that killer circle did he see the chunky *bandido*.

TO the northwest, where the hills were closest, the Kid saw the white of tents on the first ridge, marking the camp of the construction company. The dam was nearly finished. Already thousands of tons of water were stored up

behind the gigantic bulwark. Along the base of the hills ran the deep cut of Lobo River, which had dwindled to a shallow creek since the building of the dam.

Tomorrow the construction gangs would be paid off. That made the Kid feel certain that Eagle Hawn would try to crack into the bank's vaults tonight. It would be his last chance.

The Kid lowered himself to the ground. He strode down the plank sidewalk. On the opposite side of the street an armed guard had been thrown around the bank. Seven men. Each carried a brace of Colts, a sawed-off shotgun, and cartridge-filled bandoliers crisscrossed from the shoulders. They were men like Deputy Root, bulldogs of the law. The creak of a board, the rasp of a lock would start them shooting.

The Kid's face set. "God!" he muttered. "Hawn will try anything. But he can't make it! They'll tear him to pieces with those scatter-guns."

The Kid clenched his fists. He started toward the Mexican settlement, where Giant and Dandy were searching. The Horde had to get Hawn before he tackled the bank, before scatter-guns could turn him into a blood-drenched sieve.

A few blocks away, the Kid found the two Hordemen prowling around crumbling adobes. They heard his approach, but couldn't see him. Dandy swung around, leveled a six-gun. The Kid uttered a low owl-hoot.

Dandy gasped. His gun lowered. "Hell, son, yuh should 'a' kept in the light. I almost mistook yuh for a spic."

"No sign of Hawn, eh?" asked the Kid.

"He's around, all right," said Giant. "'Bout two-three hours ago, he had chuck an' a wash-up at the Alvarez adobe down the street. You know Alvarez. We saved his brother from a lynch-law hangin' last year. Alvarez recognized Hawn, but he knowed yuh let him out o' jail, an' he figured the Horde wanted Hawn to get away."

The Kid shook his head. "Confound that Hawn. He doesn't know what hell he's firin' up."

Leaving the two, the Kid went to another section of town. There the searching Hordemen had met citizens who'd seen a man answering to Hawn's description. One gent claimed he had seen Hawn less than an hour before, heading toward the north end of town. But a search through that district didn't produce the bank robber.

The Kid started south. Save for the noise in the Broken Spur, Deadline was like a ghost town. The few citizens who were abroad kept to the middle of the street. Save for the few street lamps and the lights gleaming from the saloons and cantinas, Deadline was cast in gloom, for all of the residences were darkened against the prospect of attracting Morales.

Heading down a side street, the Kid almost collided with a man emerging from an alley. The gent recoiled, went for his gun. The Kid laughed, to put the stranger at his ease. He hadn't seen his face, but he saw that the man was an American.

"It's all right, pardner," said the Kid. "I'm not Morales."

"Kid Calvert!" yelled the man. His gun flashed from the leather. His Stetson fell off as he leaped back.

Pete Quill! The Kid recognized the voice before he saw the ex-deputy's beefy face. The Kid's hand slapped down on his gun butt. He didn't draw. He couldn't have got the gun clear before Quill fired—and he didn't want any shots paging Blade Morales.

The Kid's left hand whipped out as Quill's gun raised. He clutched a hairy wrist. Quill winced.

"Fire that gun," rasped the Kid, "an' I'll tear yore arm from the socket. Yuh mangy lobo—sellin' out to that spic cur. By God, yuh'll hang, Quill."

The ex-deputy was snarling. He smashed the Kid between the eyes. The Kid's senses reeled. He rammed a right against Quill's nose that crunched the bone and brought a crimson spurt. The Kid had such a tight grip on Quill's gun-hand that the Morales man couldn't work his trigger finger.

The Kid started to circle his arm around his foe's head. He'd clamp on a lock that'd make this beef-face think he'd caught his head under a boulder.

"I — won't — hang," gasped Quill, struggling furiously. The ex-deputy brought up his knee viciously. "I'll kill yuh, Calvert. That'll make me—the—big—noise in Deadline." The Kid had worked him against an adobe wall and was pressing him hard.

Quill hadn't lost his arrogance. "Next election—I'll cop all the votes for sheriff." The Kid ground his teeth and got Quill's head in the bend of his elbow. The man still leered. "Terry will be out—an' I'll run the town."

THE mention of Terry threw the Kid into a killer's rage. This booze-soaked polecat talking about ousting Terry. The Kid exerted all his power. His headlock threatened to crush Quill's skull. Quill bawled in pain. The gunhog couldn't operate his knees in foul tactics, because the Kid had one leg grapevined around Quill's. The Kid couldn't wrench the gun from the skulker, but his grip never relaxed. Quill's gunhand was cold as death, his trigger finger stiff.

His manner changed. "Let me go, Calvert," he pleaded. "I'll make a deal with yuh. We're pards of the owl-hoot. Shore! Leggo, Kid. I'll—I'll cut yuh in on the Hawn swag."

"Drop that gun," gritted the Kid. "Yuh ain't cuttin' in on nothin' but a heap o' tough luck."

The Kid gave a terrific snap to his arm that circled Quill's head. The man groaned. His legs gave way. The Kid held him up, added agonizing pressure. Quill wasn't out. Suddenly he gave a violent jerk, got free, and sank his teeth into the Kid's shoulder. His jaws clamped tight.

The teeth went through the Kid's shirt, cut into the flesh. Pain shot through him, sapping his strength. His grip on Quill's wrist loosened. Instantly the man's finger curled on the trigger. Six shots roared. Bullets whined skyward.

The Kid wrenched free, snarling, trembling with fury. He lunged. The beef-face retreated, flailing his gun barrel. Then he blared out a bull-throated bellow.

"Morales! Morales! The Horde's in. The Horde! The Horde! I've got Calvert—Kid Calvert. Oh-h-h, Morales!"

Quill's thunderous voice echoed from the hills. That rumbling outburst carried throughout the town, carried to the spic cordon out on the flats. There was a moment of deathly silence. Lashing out with battering-ram punches, the Kid swung into Quill, lurched at his foe with murderous intensity, while another roaring voice threw back an answer, and guns began to blast.

Even as the Kid dodged the downswing of Quill's gun, and slammed a haymaker to the man's middle, the voice of Morales ripped out from the distance, shouting orders in Spanish. Quill threw his gun at the Kid. It struck his shoulder, spun him.

Quill uttered a triumphant yell, shouted to Morales again, and bulled in. That was what Calvert wanted. He had to hurry. Hoofs were drumming. The spics were tearing into town, spraying lead. Already he heard guns blasting in Deadline. The Horde was ranging its forces. The Horde was showing those spics what it was like to face guns that spouted flaming hell.

The Kid dug his boot heels into the dirt and launched a two-fisted attack that tore at Quill's vitals. He rocked him about the head, dazed him with sense-shattering jolts to the jaw. Quill was in a fog. His wits had been scattered. He tried to trade punches, but the Kid was a maniac in close, and his shots to the ribs caved Quill.

The Kid heard running footsteps. Men were drawing near. He didn't know whether they were Hordemen, citizens, gunhogs. He redoubled his fury, banging in blows that made his arms recoil in the sockets at the impact. Quill was sinking. He flashed a knife, lunged drunkenly.

The blade slashed the Kid along the ribs, drew blood. The knife raised for

the death stroke. The Kid crashed a left-right to Quill's underslung jaw. The wicked sliver of steel went sailing. Quill reeled, clawed at the air. Words bubbled in the crimson that gushed from his mouth. His legs failed him. He collapsed.

Men rushed up the side street. The Kid whipped around, hand streaking hipward. Then he uttered an exclamation of relief. Dandy and Giant! Their guns were smoking, their eyes wild.

"Yuh all right, son?" yelled Dandy. "Come on, then. The Horde's buckin' a stacked deck, an' the game's gettin' hot."

The three raced for the main street, where guns were thundering. All lights were out, even those in the saloons. Not a sound came from the Broken Spur.

In the moonlight, the Kid saw the peaks of sombreros rising above the water barrels which lined the street. Two dead horses lay beside the hitchrack in front of the Broken Spur. A spic was sprawled in the dust.

FROM the darkness Morales bellowed orders. That was the gent the Kid wanted. Morales was on the other side of the street. The Hordemen were taking care of themselves. Both sides were firing from cover. If the Kid could get across the street— There wasn't a chance of making a run.

Dandy and Giant were standing beside him, ready to go into action. He motioned for them to wait. Down the side street, the Kid has seen a Conestoga wagon. He went after it, lashed up the shafts, and rolled it near the intersection.

"When I climb in this," he told his pards, "give it a shove that'll send it across the street. I'm headin' for Morales. Thud hell into those spics while I'm on the way."

The Kid lay flat in the wagon. The sides covered his body. He held a gun in each hand, ready to make one blazing stand, if the spics swarmed around him. The Hordemen were doubtful, but they didn't argue. They gave the wagon a violent shove. The wheels spun. Instantly the owl-hooters poured a withering fusillade across the street where spics hid behind streaming water barrels.

Lead showered the Conestoga wagon, ripped into the stout oaken sides, rattled against the wheel spokes. Bullets shaved across the Kid's shoulder blades. Oak splinters stabbed his neck.

Suddenly a wheel hit a stone. The wagon careened, crashed into a water barrel. A wild shout came from the spics. The Kid was trapped. Dandy McLain uttered a wail. A chill ran up the Kid's spine.

"Don't yuh come across, Dandy!" he yelled. "Hold him back, Giant."

"Hold hell! I'm comin' myself!"

The Kid's tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. He felt an icy prickle along his spine. He was through. Only a matter of time before bullets pierced the oaken sides, riddled him. He was gone, yet his men intended to run to his aid. The Horde would be slaughtered.

He stifled the impulse to jump up and gun a few of the dogs before he dropped. The spic behind the water barrel was blasting away at the bottom of the wagon. The Kid could feel the bullets thumping the wood about the middle of his stomach. A couple of rounds would put a hole through the board.

He ground his teeth, tensed his muscles. Dandy and Giant hadn't rushed out yet. If they saw him go down, they wouldn't expose themselves. They'd fight from cover then. The Kid was ready. He would jump up. It was suicide, but a quick way out. And he'd save his pards.

A thunderous roar crashed above the racket of snarling guns. It was a booming, ear-splitting blast that shattered windows, that threw men flat. The deafening explosion echoed through the hills. There was another terrific detonation—and another. The firing in town suddenly ceased.

The noise of blazing guns was replaced by another roar that sent a chill through men.

"The dam!" shrilled a voice on the edge of town. "The dam's been dyna-

mited. The water's busted through. It's pouring down. The town will be flooded. Run, everybody! Run for yore lives!"

CHAPTER V

Hawn's Decision

THERE was a short space of dead silence, save for the roar of rushing, cascading water. Then Morales bellowed to his gunhogs. There was fear in his tone. He yelled for his spics to ride. His interest in Deadline was gone. The water would be flooding in. Let the citizens drown like rats. Morales had no love of water except as a chaser.

Before he had finished shouting, hoofs were pounding. The spic who had been drilling a hole through the wagon board, left his shelter and scurried into the darkness.

The Broken Spur was disgorging its patrons through doors and windows. Townsfolk were rushing from their homes. The roar from the dam grew until all noise was swallowed in it. Men were forking mounts and heading toward the water avalanching out of the hills.

In Mex Town frenzied peons were jabbering as they frantically gathered a few belongings. Men were hitching up teams and hustling their women and children into wagons and buggies. Deadline was in confusion as the inhabitants madly hastened to desert it.

Blade Morales was gone, forgotten. The only calm ones were the Hordemen. They gathered in the deserted Broken Spur, in a back room, closing the door against the racket outside.

"We best be foggin'," suggested a Hordeman. "I was in a flood onct. It ain't nothin' to be in. I was swimmin' along as nice as yuh please, when—biffo—a log clunked me on the nob, an' I drank a gallon o' yaller water before a feller fished me onto a housetop."

The Kid laughed. "Yuh won't get yore feet wet this time, Jake. The flats will be dampened some, but the dry bed of Lobo River will catch most of the water an' shoot it down its course. Folks hereabouts know that as well as I do. Reckon people jest went hog-wild with panic. But they'll come to their senses soon—but not soon enough, if I've got the right hunch. Gents, I want yuh to stick right here. I'm makin' a little pasear down the street. Yuh'll spoil my play if yuh follow."

Leaving the perplexed owl-hooters, the Kid went out the rear door and hurried through the gloom of a back street. He cut into an alley and paused in the shadows of a harness shop opposite the Cattlemen's Bank. The bank guards had been swept along in the rush.

The roar from the dynamited dam had diminished. None of the water reached Deadline. The Kid waited. The main street was deserted. The bank was silent, dark. He peered up and down the street. Shouts sounded from the dam, where men were working. Wagon wheels rattled down toward Deadline. Citizens were returning. But it was for a lone man that the Kid kept this vigil.

Fifteen, twenty minutes passed. The Kid became fidgety. He gnawed at his lip. His expression grew sour. He muttered, and began thinking of Terry, worrying. Where had the girl been during all this turmoil? Why hadn't Terry formed a posse? Why hadn't she directed concerted action against the spics? The Kid accused himself of laxity. He should have gone to Terry's home first, should have made certain that she was safe.

He snapped rigid. A faint glow appeared in the Cattlemen's Bank. The Kid's eyes flashed. He yanked a gun, raced across the street. Again the bank was dark.

Cautiously the Kid turned the knob of the stout oaken door. It was unlocked. He pushed the door inward, edged through. A dog wouldn't have heard his stealthy approach, but the man working the dial on the vault leaped to his feet and pointed a gun at the Kid. Draft coming through the opened door had warned him.

"Up with them, hombre" rasped the voice of Eagle Hawn. "Reach high or yuh'll be a candidate for a pine box."

"I'll call yore bluff, Hawn," spoke the Kid easily. "Yuh ain't a killin' jasper. That's why yuh've been caught so much, why yuh've tangled so often with the law. Yuh'd rather be arrested for robbery than hunted down for murder."

The Kid advanced swiftly, striding through a door in the heavy wire network. Eagle Hawn was exposed now, peering strangely at the intruder. He raised his small lamp.

"Say—are you—Kid Calvert?" he asked excitedly.

"I answer to that name when I'm among the right folks," replied the Kid. "Might as well pocket that toy pistol. An' believe me, Eagle, I ain't bluffin' with this smoke wagon. I won't kill yuh. Yo're too valuable a man to kill. But try anything tough—an' I'll sure put a hole in yuh somewhere. Comin' along like a gent?"

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Hawn. "You hoorawing me, Kid? Sure, I'll come like a gent. Why, I'm proud to walk with you. Wait a jiffy. I've got to rattle these tumblers. You might lend a hand toting away the money bags. That's the trouble with this profession. Lugging away goldpieces is very, very irksome, especially when a posse is on your trail."

"Yuh can neglect yore irksome duty this time, Eagle," said the Kid. "I don't think the boys in the hills would appreciate yore efforts, even though yuh gave them more work blowin' up their dam."

"Nicely timed, wasn't it?" replied Hawn, his eyes flashing with pride. "That's the way a magician works. Gets the crowd interested in what his left hand is doing, while his right is pullin' a rabbit from his coat-tails."

HAWN pressed his ear close to the dial. His long fingers worked skillfully. Two clicks sounded. The bank robber chuckled, stood up, and swung open the vault door. The Kid jumped forward and closed it.

"Yuh got me wrong, Eagle," he said. "Yo're not packin' anything away from this job. Yo're comin' with me. The Horde wants to meet yuh. There's a little gent in our bunch who hankers to flip cards with yuh. Little Dandy McLain is sure interested in that lucky deck yuh always tote."

Hawn eyed the Kid sharply. For a flash he dropped his attitude. Then he grinned. "Oh, I see. A friendly little game. I should think he'd be afraid of my cards. Most sharps figure they're marked." He gazed at the Kid's leveled gun, frowned, then shrugged.

"You're not in a sporting mood tonight, Kid. But you did me a neat favor this afternoon—and I'm not forgetting. You think I should leave this dinero for the poor muckers up on the dam. All right. They'll only squander it, but I'm willing to overlook human frailty for once. Let's go, pard."

Hawn cast a longing look at the vault, and then went ahead of the Kid. They reached the street without being seen, and hurried into the darkness of an alley.

His gun still leveled, the Kid escorted Hawn into the back room of the Broken Spur. The owl-hooters jumped at the sight of the bank robber. The Kid quickly explained.

"By coots, Eagle!" exclaimed Peel Rogers, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Yo're the fust millionaire I've ever seen that wasn't posin' as an upstandin' citizen."

"A little high on your figures, pard," said Hawn, bowing to the grizzled cook. "I've got to open about five more vaults before I get in that class. But I'm sure gratified with the reception you've given me."

The bank robber grew serious. "Gents, I've got a confession to make. This game's getting too tough to play solo. It isn't the law, you understand. I can handle the star Johnnies. They mess me up a bit, but they don't get results. Morales is different. Morales—" Terror suddenly shone in his eyes. "Gents, I need protection. I want to join the Horde."

Hawn's gaze swept the group. He saw nothing but cold poker eyes. He nodded.

"I understand. You don't take in any scut. Um-m. That's why I tried to rob the bank tonight. I wanted to show you that I'm not exactly a jughead.

"I wanted to show you that I'd go through with a proposition—even when I'm afraid. And I fear Morales. I fear him more than any living thing." Hawn made a gesture of appeal. "I'm willing to do anything to prove my worth. I earnestly beg you to consider my application. I need the Horde."

His request met with silence. Men stared at the table. Men drummed the board, but they didn't answer Hawn. For once this gent was awkward, abashed. He started to speak, then broke off, shaking his head.

Outside sounded the rattle of wheels and the beat of hoofs. In the saloon boot heels thudded, spurs jingled. The Kid grew uneasy.

"By doggies, Hawn," said the explosive Peel Rogers, "the Horde oughta be proud to have yuh join up! What do yuh ringtailed baboons say? Is Hawn in the Horde, or ain't he?"

"The Horde!" came a shout from the corridor. "The Horde's got Hawn. They're in the back room. Surround the place, men!"

The Kid went for his gun. Someone had been eavesdropping. The man's cry started a wild scramble in the barroom. Men were shouting, running from the building. A shot rang out. Citizens in the street were blaring for reenforcements. Deadline had been pushed too far. The town was ready to fight.

The Hordemen leaped up, edging away from the window. Their eyes slitted; their faces grew harsh. Peel Rogers knocked over a chair and bounded for the door, gripping his Colt and shouting for the others to follow. The Kid blocked his way, shoved him back.

"We don't want any ruckus," he said sharply. "Get to yore broncs, men. Fog for the old Montero adobe. We'll hole up there. I'm afraid something's happened to Terry. It ain't her style to stick at home when Deadline's in trouble. We best stay in town until we find out for sure. Hawn, get between Giant and Nate."

THE corridor was clear when the Kid opened the door. The Hordemen eased out the back way, where their mounts were ground anchored in the alley. Citizens were swarming in front of the Broken Spur, but none of them ventured into the darkness.

The Montero adobe, long abandoned, stood about a half mile from town. While the Horde rode there, the Kid went to Terry's home. He grew clammy with dread as he reined Star to a halt before the dark house. Dismounting, he ran up the steps and hammered on the door. A dog scooted around from the backyard and barked at him, but no sign of life showed in the house. The Kid suddenly went weak. Terry was gone. He pictured her lying dead somewhere.

"Terry! Terry!" he cried frantically. He rapped on the windows, banged on the back door. Cold sweat studded his forehead. Terrible thoughts plagued him. His heart thumped. He raged at himself for not hunting for Terry sooner.

A man next door appeared on the porch. "What's all the fuss about, stranger?" he asked.

"Terry," the Kid said tensely. "Have you seen Terry Reynolds?"

The man shook his head. "She visited my wife about three hours ago. Said she was going to round up a posse to herd the Morales gang off to the calaboose. Mebbe she's up at the dam."

The Kid's heart raced with hope. It crushed him to think that Terry had been hurt or killed, and he grabbed eagerly for any idea suggesting she might be safe. Thanking the man, he sprinted for his mount. In the saddle, he gave Star an unaccustomed dig of the spurs, sending the steel-dust at a breeze-burning pace across the flats.

The stallion never slackened speed until he reached Lobo River, which had dwindled again to a shallow stream. Star splashed through the water and plunged up the hill through the chaparral

at a high lope. The dam was a hive swarming with men.

Hawn had dynamited a jagged hole in the gigantic concrete bulwark. Already the flood had ceased, for the water level had reached the bottom of the fissure. Scores of men were wielding singlejacks and mixing concrete. Strings of lanterns lighted the dam. The Kid saw that Hawn hadn't done as much harm as he had imagined.

Through the milling crowd, the Kid searched for Terry, for a fluffy-haired girl with a star on her blouse. He spoke to dozens of men. The Kid's eyes deadened as each one shook his head. Terry hadn't been at the dam. With shoulders drooping, the Kid rode down the slope, heading for the Montero adobe. His heart seemed as heavy as a millstone. He felt like a withered old man.

A couple of owl-hooters rode around the crumbling structure. They spotted the Kid, and raised their guns in challenge. As he neared the adobe, the Kid heard loud talking from within. The voice of Giant Anderson rose stridently.

"Let me handle him, Dandy," the big fellow boomed. "I'll give the dirty, struttin' skulker his deservings. I'll bust his spine across my knee. I'll tie him in a knot an' throw him to the wolves."

The Kid snapped out of his slump. His eyes flashed. Star responded to a touch of the spurs with a plunge. The guards cracked out a command for him to stop. The Kid shouted to them, streaked by. Then he was tugging the steel-dust to a sliding halt and springing from the saddle. He rushed inside to see Giant's shoulder-of-mutton paw reaching out for the gullet of Pete Quill.

"Stop!" the Kid yelled. "What's the trouble, Giant?"

"Trouble?" snorted Peel Rogers, before the big fellow could speak. "This hydrophoby skunk is foulin' the atmosphere, by coots. Giant's goin' to kill him, so decent men can breathe clean air. The sidewinder says Morales has Terry a prisoner. Says we have to give up Hawn —or Terry goes below the Line!"

The Kid shrieked. Never in his life had he let himself go so completely. His eyes blazed like a madman's. Vicious snarls came from his throat. His face turned death-gray beneath its bronze. Then the color mounted. His lips curled back. His face became as savage as a wolf's.

He lunged at Pete Quill. He drove Quill against the adobe wall. Steel-spring hands closed around the man's neck. Powerful fingers tore at the windpipe. The Kid would have clawed a hole in Quill's throat, would have killed the man with his bare hands—but little Dandy stepped in.

"Back up, son," the gambler said calmly. "Yo're buckin' a royal flush with a pair of deuces."

THE Kid did back up, but he almost screamed at Dandy. "Didn't yuh hear? Terry goes below the Line if— Below the Line, Dandy! Don't yuh know what that means?"

"Yes, son. Too well. Too well." Dandy put his arm over the Kid's trembling shoulders. "Hell is paradise compared to what happens to girls when they go below the Line. But we've got to handle this matter sensibly."

Pete Quill had recovered from fright. He rubbed his neck tenderly. "Yeah," he sneered. "Yuh got to be sensible. Kill me, an' yore dainty little peach blossom goes below the Line. Morales means business. I take back Hawn tonfght or—"

The Kid regained control, but he was still shaking. He saw that Morales must have captured Terry when the girl had started out to organize a posse. The whole town knew that the Horde had caught Hawn. The word had traveled to Morales, who had sent Quill back.

"What can we do?" the Kid murmured. "We can't turn Hawn over to Morales, an' we have to get Terry."

Hawn was slumped in a rickety chair. He had gone white. He had gnawed at his lacerated lips until they were bleeding. His fingernails pierced the flesh in the palms of his hands. His eyes were feverish. Often he started from his

chair only to drop back again. His face was haggard. Perspiration drenched him.

Dandy had no plan. The others were silent, thinking. Quill leered at them, and swaggered about the room. Every time Giant looked at the man, he shuddered with rage.

"Mebbe if I went along with Quill an' posed as Hawn—" began the Kid. His voice was broken. His features had aged.

Quill guffawed. "Why don't yuh try it, Kid? Mebbe Morales will take yuh below the Line, so yuh can see what happens to gals that are sent south. Come along. Morales kin get Hawn later."

The ex-deputy strutted up and down, flaunting his contempt. The owl-hooters had become very, very still. But cold ferocity masked every face.

None of them looked at Hawn. The thought of turning him over to Quill hadn't entered their heads. They had to get the girl, yet they couldn't send Hawn to fiendish torture and slow, agonizing death.

"Might be a good idea for the bunch of us to go after Morales," suggested Nate Willstock, the wintry-eyed one. "Mebbe we can surprise him, find the girl before Morales can get away with her. I don't think he'd kill her. She's worth money to him alive."

"Sure, sure," jeered Quill, "that's the idea. Only thing wrong is that Morales thought of it first. He's sorta expectin' an attack. He says that Terry Reynolds dies the second guns begin to talk."

Hawn leaped up, tense, and white, and drawn. He raised his hands. "This has gone far enough!" he exclaimed shrilly. "Quill, come on. I'm ready. I don't care what Morales does to me. Let him feed me to the ants, burn me—anything. A man can stand so much; then he passes out. I can take physical torture better than what I'm going through now. I wouldn't want to live, knowing that I'd been the cause of a girl going—below the Line. I'm ready, Quill."

There was a wild light in Hawn's eyes. But his body had relaxed. No longer did his nails dig into his hands. No longer did he gnaw at his lips. He had reached the state of mind of one who has thrown away all hope.

"Eagle," cried the Kid, "yuh can't do this! Yuh can't, man! Lord in heaven, yo're insane. Morales won't stop at anything. He branded yuh once, Eagle. Yuh said that the next time, yuh was through. Yuh said that, Eagle. An' yuh know it's true. It's suicide. Yo're insane."

Hawn shook his head slowly, and there was a smile on his torn lips. "No Kid, amigo," he said quietly. "Not insane. Not any more. I *was* crazy. But now I'm seeing things right. Come on, Quill."

Even Quill was shaken now. He stared in awe at Hawn. The bank robber grabbed the ex-deputy by the arm and shoved him out the open door. The Hordemen stood frozen, spellbound. Suddenly the Kid sprang toward Hawn, to stop him. Dandy McLain clutched the Kid's arm.

"No, son," he spoke softly. "Let him go. It's the only way. We all have to die, Hawn's goin' sooner than the others, that's all." Dandy called to the sentries. "Let 'em through, men."

The Kid fell into a chair, brushed a hand wearily across his face. A great sob escaped him. He looked so tired.

PRESENTLY hoofs were drumming the alkali. Quill and his prisoner were heading toward the southwest. The Hordemen shook themselves from a spell. Men swore. Men exclaimed in awe at this stripling who was giving up everything for a girl who was his enemy.

"God," spoke the Giant softly, "there goes a man. A man."

"He had everything to live for," muttered Nate Willstock. "Looks, health, money—an' he loved life."

"By coots an' by doggies!" yelled Peel Rogers. "It's a rotten trick, lettin' that swell gazabo ride into hell. I'm fer follerin' them, an' shootin' that Morales pack so full o' lead that the buzzards will bust their beaks peckin' at thar carcasses. Come on!"

"No," exclaimed the Kid, jumping up. "Yuh stay here—an' the rest o' yuh. I'm goin', see? I'm goin'. I'll give myself up. At least, I'll be near Terry. At least, I can save her from being shipped below the Line, even if—if I have to shoot—"

Before any of them could respond, the Kid flung out the door. He mounted Star and rode away without looking back. An expert at reading signs, he had no difficulty following the tracks of the other mounts. He sent the stallion at an easy pace, because he didn't want to catch up.

Heading up the first slope, he became aware that someone was riding madly on his trail. He turned. The moonlight gleamed on the little figure of Dandy McLeain, bent low over his bronc's neck. A pang went through the Kid. He might have expected this of Dandy. But the little gambler would have to turn back. This was a one-man job. The Kid was frowning when the owl-hooter reined up beside him.

"I figured two heads would have more ideas than one," said Dandy. "We're takin' a long chance, headin' into Morales' hideout; but mebbe we can stack the deck to draw winnin' cards. Let's drift, son."

"Dandy, yuh oughta go back," spoke the Kid tensely. "I'm not returnin'—unless Terry is with me. The Horde needs yuh, Dandy. Yuh've got to carry on. Yuh've got to hold the men together. Go back, Dandy. I'm ridin' in solo."

"Yeah?" grunted the gambler. "As long as I'm breathin', yo're not goin' alone. I'll turn back if yuh do. But I'm stickin' with yuh, son. Mebbe Morales will let Terry go."

The Kid shook his head. "Yuh know better than to say that of Morales. Even if he did, he'd still have Hawn. I'm the cause of Hawn gettin' into this mess. Either I get him out, or I go down tryin'."

They rode on in silence. Anxiety numbed the Kid. Fear for Terry dwarfed the danger that lay ahead. Dandy was moody. Often he gazed at his smooth hands, wiggling his slender fingers and making gestures as though he were dealing cards. The Kid gritted his teeth. He understood. Dandy believed he had played his last game.

The trail took them through thick stands of timber, through a tumbled land slashed by many gulches. They rode slowly, expecting at any moment to hear a shot. An hour had passed. They pushed out of a draw onto a level, brush-grown straightaway.

Ahead rose two jagged, bald chimney buttes, marking the entrance to a narrow defile. Dandy stared at the gap, swallowed hard. He whistled very softly. His hand started for his gun. The Kid grabbed his wrist.

"Want to get picked off by a sniper?" he growled. "If the hideout is yonder, sentries are—"

Something shrieked overhead, followed by the staccato crack of a high-powered rifle. Midway up a rock-studded butte, powder smoke puffed out. Long barrels glinted in the moonlight. Rifles began a harsh clatter, and steel-jacketed bullets screamed around the two. They reined to a halt, raised their hands.

Muscles bulged on the Kid's jaw. He stiffened. His eyes were flinty. Low snarls escaped him. It was hard to leave his gun holstered. Five sombreroed spics, shrieking like madmen, swooped through the defile. Flame stabbed from their pounding sixes. They surrounded Dandy and the Kid, took their guns, and herded them into the *bandido* hideout.

CHAPTER VI

VALLEY OF DEATH

BEYOND the gap lay a small valley locked in by sheer, rocky walls. The defile provided the only entrance. In the valley were the remains of an ancient civilization—crumbling heaps that once had been mud huts, remnants of crude agricultural implements, and several small stone houses which had weathered the years.

Toward one of them, the spic prodded the prisoners. Strewn about the ground

were bits of broken pottery. The Kid stepped among skeletons that crumbled into dust under his weight. He saw a large flat stone, inscribed with many weird designs. Probably a sacrificial stone used in ancient ceremonies. Near it lay the head of a bronze idol, crusted with green corrosion. The Kid realized that centuries ago this valley had sheltered an Aztec settlement.

The half-breeds shoved the two into a lighted stone house where Blade Morales sat behind a rough-hewn table. At the sight of the Kid, the *bandido* leaped up. His hand flashed for his gun, but he didn't raise it. He chuckled, and his tiny eyes glittered.

"The gun, eet ees too queeck, *señor*," he purred. "For you, who tell me een the Broken Spur what I should do, I have sometheeng much better, sometheeng that weel mak' you squeal, *amigo*. I have beeg red ants!"

Pete Quill swaggered into the room. He blinked and gasped at the sight of the prisoners. Then a cruel, gloating smile curled his lips. "Why, howdy, Kid Calvert. How yuh stackin' up these days?"

The name gave Morales a start. His wicked little eyes widened. He stared at the Kid, his mouth agape. Then awe changed to anger, and anger was replaced by amusement. He bowed low before the owl-hooter.

"Keed Calvert! The gr-r-reat Keed Calvert. Eet ees a pleasure to know you. Ver-ry much do I admire you. Today you fool the gran' Morales! *Si!* The hombre who fool Morales ees wan smart caballero. Tonight, Keed, you are my guest. Tomorrow—" The peon shrugged. "Tomorrow, mebbeso you go below the Line weeth *Señorita* Terry."

Snarling, the Kid lunged for the squat, leering spic. His fist lashed out, but Morales swayed back, and four of his henchmen piled on the Kid, hurling him against the wall. The *bandido* chuckled, motioning for his hirelings to take the prisoners away.

The spics led the Hordemen to another stone house. Inside, the Kid confronted Eagle Hawn and Terry. He uttered a glad cry and rushed toward the girl, who shrank from him.

"Don't come near me!" she cried. "You—you brute. How could you be so cruel? How could you turn Hawn over to Quill? You knew what Morales would do, yet you—"

"Miss Terry!" exclaimed Hawn. "Don't say that. It isn't true. A finer gent than Kid Calvert never breathed. He tried to hold me back. But I wouldn't stay. I couldn't, knowing that Morales might send you—"

The bank robber stopped suddenly as the girl shuddered. She knew where Morales planned to take her. The Kid ignored her accusation. She was under a great strain. The hate that Deadline had for the Horde, and the evil things said about the Kid, couldn't help but influence Terry. She only caught glimpses of his true character.

"I'm sorry," the girl said, touching her hand to the Kid's arm. "I'm unstrung. I've been pleading with Hawn to tell Morales where his cache is hidden. If Morales gets the treasure, he'll let us go. I can get a posse together, and catch his men before they can get below the border."

Hawn shook his head. "That's a vow I made that I'll never break. I risked my life a hundred times to build up my stake. It's mine and I'm keepin' it."

The Kid was still anxious about Terry. "Did Morales—hurt yuh any?" he asked, his eyes glinting.

The girl shook her head. "He's all that is bad. He might kill me. He would send me—away. But he is awed by a white woman. He broke the jaw of a man who tried to put his arm around me."

The Kid nodded grimly.

"What are we goin' to do?" asked Dandy McLain. "We're not locked in here. We can roam around. Mebbe I can sneak up on one of them Mexican jumpin' beans an' get his hogleg."

"You won't be able to sneak up on them," said Hawn. "I tried it. We've got to work out a better scheme. Maybe

when Morales starts working on me, you three can make a getaway."

The Kid growled at that suggestion. There were loud voices outside, the heavy clump of footsteps. The door opened and Morales strutted in. Behind him strode two spics, carrying a couple of roast chickens, wine bottles, and platters of steaming food. Those platters were of silver—loot obviously from some big rancho.

"Ha!" laughed the peon, pulling a leg from a chicken and tearing the meat from the bone. "Morales, he breeng wan beeg feast for hees *amigos*. See? I, the gran' caballero, eat the cheecken. Be not afraid, my *compadres*. There ees no poison een thees chuck."

The food was set on the table, wine bottles opened, and the prisoners invited to dig in. They were hungry, and the chicken was savory and browned to a turn. Dandy was the first to carve off a big slice. The others followed suit. Morales chuckled in childish glee as his captives devoured the feast. He was under the spell of another whim. There was no doubt that at the moment he looked upon them as his friends.

When they had finished eating, Morales clapped his hands with a flourishing gesture, and spics entered to clear the table. One of them brought in a box of poker chips. Morales was chuckling like a witless child.

"Now we play the game," he said. "I show you what I am. I show you that I am not only the most gran' caballero in all the worl', but the bes' cardman in the worl', too. *Señor* Hawn, I hear much about your lucky cards. I hear you nevaire lose. No—no, not ontil you meet the gr-r-reat Morales. *Si! Señor* Hawn, the cards. *Señor* Dandy McLain, they say you are ver-ry clevaire. Nobody can beat you, they say. But have you play' Morales? No, *señor*."

EAGLE HAWN had a strange look in his eyes as he brought forth his deck of soiled cards, with the queer designs on the back.

Morales motioned for them to sit down. "Amigos, you have won thousands. *Si*. But tonight you play for millions. Ever' cheep, she count for wan million peso. We play for ver-ry high stakes, but we do not put oop dinero, 'cause eef you have dinero, I take eet, anyway."

Hawn shuffled the cards. Morales eyed him closely, and made the cut. The cards were dealt. The men were silent. Dandy held his cards close to his flowery vest, his eyes blank, his face as inscrutable as a Chinaman's. The betting was high and the play brisk. Hawn raked in the chips on a filled straight against three jacks held by Dandy and two pairs in Morales' hand. The *bandido* muttered Spanish oaths.

The Kid's eyes were on the game, but he was racking his head for an idea. How could he trick this mad spic? It would be foolish to slug the peon, to snatch for his gun. Morales had guards outside. The Kid had to think always of the girl.

At the moment Terry had forgotten her danger. She had picked up a fragment of pottery, and was studying its strange carvings.

"A tribute to Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec sun god," she said, showing the inscription to the Kid. "What a rich find this valley would be for a museum."

"You savvy this Aztec hen scratchin'?" the Kid asked.

"Yes," answered the girl. "I studied it in school, an'—"

Her words were lost in a roar from Morales. The cards had favored Hawn again. His pile of chips was mounting. The spic had the smallest stack of the three. Although no money was at stake, Morales was angered at losing. His eyes watched every move that Dandy made as he dealt; but keener eyes than Morales' had failed to catch the little gambler in the act of second-dealing. He was doing that now.

Suddenly the Kid got the idea for which he had been groping. Standing in back of Morales, he got Dandy's eyes, and silently formed the word "win" on his lips. At the same time he pointed to

Morales. Dandy understood. The Kid got the same message to Hawn.

The Kid spoke to the spic. "Any chance of steppin' outside for a breath of air, Morales?"

"Go ahead," muttered the disgruntled *bandido*. "Try to escape, *amigo*, and see what happens. Come on, *señores*, we play for beeg stakes now. I open the pot weeth the million pesos—so. Now I show you the real stuff, by golly."

Terry started out with the Kid, who motioned her to stay. The guards eyed him suspiciously, but they didn't stop him. The Kid casually wandered over to a rock house where he knew Pete Quill had his quarters. He knocked on the door.

Quill opened it. "What do yuh want?" he demanded belligerently.

"Nothing, pard," said the Kid sarcastically. "I jest dropped around to give yuh the hoss laugh. Yuh seemed to have got some chuckles out of me. Now it's my turn."

"Yeah?" growled Quill. "What are yuh talkin' about? Not tryin' to get friendly, are yuh? I can shoot yuh down, an' tell Morales I caught yuh tryin' to escape."

"Sure, sure," said the Kid easily. "But yuh won't. Morales isn't any amigo of yores, Quill. Yuh figured to get a nice whack out of Hawn's cache, didn't yuh? Well, Morales has sold yuh out. He's hookin' up with Hawn. He's over in yonder house now, actin' like he's jest met a long-lost brother. I wouldn't be surprised if you were buzzard bait, come mornin'. Who's the jughead now, Quill?"

Quill scowled at the Kid and chewed no his pipe. "Tryin' to hooraw me?"

"Hoorawin' yuh, am I?" gritted the Kid. "Crow-hop over to that house an' see for yoreself."

Quill nodded. He grabbed his hat and strode alongside the Kid, who fell a little behind when they neared the house. He was only playing a long chance. Then his heart pounded exultantly. Morales was guffawing. Through the slats secured over the paneless windows, he saw the spic slapping Hawn on the back.

"Ha, *amigo*, you are *bueno caballero*," yelled the boisterous *bandido*. "You are the bes' frien' I got. *Si!* But you cannot beat old Morales weeth the cards."

"Havin' a friendly little game between discussions," the Kid whispered insinuatingly. "Yo're through, Quill. Yuh were jest a tool for Morales. He used yuh, an' now he'll toss yuh aside. Now if I was in yore shoes, I'd be havin' a little discussion, too." The Kid's eyes shifted to another rock house, where through the window, he saw several spics around a table. "So long, Quill." The Kid's voice was mocking.

He entered the house, wondering if he had planted the seeds of hate deep enough. Morales was stacking up the chips and laughing at Hawn. The *bandido* was feeling very expansive. The girl looked a question at the Kid. Hawn and Dandy showed curiosity, too; but Morales' only interest now was in winning hands.

The Kid stood against the rear wall, watching the window. Morales hauled in the chips again and again. The great idiotic grin never left his face. Often he guffawed. Often he slapped Hawn on the back, ruffled Dandy's hair; begged Terry to have a sip of wine. His booming voice filled the room.

Suddenly the Kid grew tense. Men were standing before the window, out of the circle of light. The Kid recognized the beefy face of Pete Quill, saw the sombreros behind him. While Quill watched, Morales scooped up another pile of chips. The *bandido* was drunk with success. He reached over and hugged Hawn, hugged the man he later intended to torture.

QUILL disappeared. The Kid's pulses hammered. What would be the result of his trick? With his eyes he indicated to Hawn and Dandy that they could play to win. Soon Morales was swearing again. And it was Hawn who won all the pots. The spic's stack of chips became smaller and smaller.

Suddenly Morales' manner changed. He gathered up the cards and shoved the

pack in his pocket. He kicked back his chair, knocked over the table, and slammed a wine bottle against the wall.

"Carramba!" he snarled. "You cheat, you dam' greengo peeg. I tak' these cards. I weel study them and learn how you ween weeth them, by golly."

The spic clumped from the house. He hadn't gone more than twenty yards when a gun blast shattered the night's stillness. Morales uttered a howl. The Kid peered out the window. The spic was sprinting for shelter, his guns roaring. Three of his henchmen were with him. Suddenly one dropped.

"He's doing it!" exclaimed the Kid. "Quill has turned against Morales. Come on gents. One man's down already. There goes another. We can get guns."

The Kid didn't need to explain. Hawn leaped ahead of the Kid, plunged out the door. The shooting was centered around two buildings about a hundred yards away. Less than half that distance lay two spic bodies.

Morales was thundering orders. Suddenly shots roared from the mouth of the defile. The Kid was outside now, racing behind Hawn. He heard an agonized scream, saw one of the sentries hurtle from a chimney butte.

Shouts sounded from outside the valley. The Horde had arrived, was centered there, fighting to get through. The Kid didn't think the owl-hooters could make it. A couple of men hidden on those buttes could hold off an army. It was up to the Kid, and Dandy, and Hawn.

The little gambler was speeding along close behind. The girl had left the house. A chill went through the Kid. He turned and motioned for her to go back.

"Stick to shelter, Terry. Stick to shelter."

The girl pointed to her star and kept on running.

Hawn had reached the dead spics. He grabbed a gun. A man darted from a tree a few yards from the bank robber. The Kid yelled a warning to Hawn. The safecracker threw himself to the ground, behind one of the corpses.

The Kid zigzagged toward a tree. But he knew he could never make it. Pete Quill was swinging a gun on him. The Kid had warned Hawn against the ex-deputy, and the cry had caused Quill to shift his aim. The beef-face's gun snarled, but it snarled a split-second after hell spouted from Hawn's gun. A bullet plucked at the Kid's shirt.

That slug was from Quill's gun. But the lead from Hawn's Colt got the killer in the pit of the stomach. The gun slipped from Quill's nerveless fingers. He fought madly for life. He reeled, tried to grab the falling gun, and sprawled headlong. Pete Quill was dead.

"There goes Morales!" yelled Hawn. "He's mine—that jasper."

Morales was astride his bronc, heading up the valley, where sheer walls reached to the clouds on three sides. The firing had lessened, for the spics had been fighting viciously among themselves, and many of them were dead or out of commission. Quill had organized his faction well, for the sombreroed men were still pouring lead at each other.

Dandy McLain had grabbed two Colts, and they were bucking in his hands. The little gambler uttered a yelp as a bullet nicked him. He went down on one knee, rocketing lead at the kill-crazy peon who was trying to bring him down. Another slug caught him in the side, and the little fellow slumped.

"Dandy! Dandy! Are yuh bad hurt?" cried the Kid, snatching up Quill's gun and blasting away at the spic. The first shot tore through the gunhog's chest. The Kid raced toward Dandy. He felt a sting along his neck. The spic was sagging, losing strength fast, but he still had his six leveled at the Kid.

Again flame slashed from the peon's Colt, but the hand was numbing and the bullet plowed into the dirt at the Kid's feet. The owl-hooter didn't fire, because the man was dying on his feet. Suddenly the peon's body lurched, and another evil career was over as the hulking figure pitched to the ground.

"I'm all right, son," gasped Dandy, trying to struggle erect. The best he

could do was to reach his knees. His side was drenched with crimson. He was in pain, but he waved the Kid away.

Suddenly Terry screamed. The Kid whirled. She was close to Morales' house, struggling with a massive spic. The Kid ground his teeth, charged after the peon. The gunhog fired twice, but each time the girl struck his arm, spoiling his aim. Then the hammer clicked on an empty shell.

The Kid raced in. A blade flashed. The steel whipped down. The Kid felt the tip slice his shoulder. He jerked to the side. Fear turned the spic into a maniac. The knife raised. Again it descended—straight for the girl's trembling heart.

THE KID uttered a frantic cry. With all his might, he brought the gun barrel down on the spic's head. There was a sickening crack. The body collapsed. The girl sagged against the wall.

"Are yuh hurt, Terry dear!" cried the Kid fearfully, grasping her in his arms. She clung to him, this girl who had sworn to exterminate the Horde, and the Kid kissed her. Hungrily his lips pressed against hers. She gasped from the pressure of his embrace.

"Oh, Stan dear!" she murmured, using the name that came to her lips only when love swept away all the complexities of their lives. "If we could only have peace. If we could only go away—"

A shot smashed out ahead. Someone screamed. The Kid broke from the girl's embrace. Hawn was yelling in agony. Morales was a quarter mile up the valley. Hawn had been in close pursuit. But now he swayed in the saddle. Morales fired again, guffawed as the bank robber hurtled into the bushes.

The Kid ran to where a saddle horse was standing, a dead spic still clutching the bridle reins. A sudden idea had occurred to the owl-hooter. He had puzzled why Hawn had taken after Morales—Hawn who had such fear of the *bandido*. Now he knew. And he also knew that he was on the verge of discovering a great secret.

Forking the mustang, the Kid headed up the valley at breakneck speed. He couldn't stop for Hawn now. Too much depended on catching Morales. Suddenly he saw why the killer had ridden this way. The spic had dismounted, and he was muscling himself up a rope that was looped around a jagged outjutting of rock on the crest of the wall. The *bandido* was hauling the rope up after him.

"Come down, Morales, or I'll pour lead into yuh!" yelled the Kid, firing close to the spic's head.

The *bandido* held a gun between his teeth. Clutching the rope with one hand, he grasped the Colt and blazed away. A bullet struck a boulder, chipping the rock. A granite splinter caught the Kid on the forehead, knocked him flat.

He fought mightily to keep his senses. He had to get Morales. Maybe Hawn was dead. And the only other man who had the secret of the bank robber's cache was the spic.

His head whirling, his eyes blinded with pain, the Kid struggled to his knees. Morales fired again, hitting rock that showered the Kid with sharp fragments. The Kid raised a feeble hand, got an unsteady aim, and cut loose. Before the last explosion had ceased echoing, he was sprawled out again, unconscious.

He did not know how long he had been relieved of his senses. When he came to, dawn was graying the eastern sky. He was surrounded by men. He looked up at familiar faces. The Horde had got through the pass. Giant Anderson was bending over him, sloshing water on his face.

"Morales," murmured the Kid. Get Morales!"

"He's got, by coots!" exclaimed Peel Rogers. "Yuh put three slugs in the critter, Kid. He musta fell nigh onto a hundred feet. He'll be orderin' his chilli con carne in hell after this."

Terry had stepped forward, and was kneeling beside him.

"The cards, girl," he spoke in a whisper. "In Morales' back pocket. Yuh can read that Aztec stuff. See what's on the

back of those cards. Hawn wanted them powerful bad. He—"

Nature rebelled again. He regained consciousness once more to look up into Terry's eyes. The Horde was standing away, out of earshot.

"I have deciphered most of the figures on the back of Hawn's cards," said the girl. "I'm not sure that I interpreted all the symbols correctly, but a free translation goes something like this: 'At the headwaters of the Wolf, face the new-born day, and walk thirty strides to the lair of the cougar, and therein find the eagle's nest.'"

"Sure, that's it!" said the Kid exultantly. "'Headwaters of the Wolf.' That means the source of the Lobo River, about twenty-thirty miles from here. The new-born day starts in the east, doesn't it? Thirty strides east to a cougar's den, an' there yuh'll find an eagle's nest. Golden eagles, Terry! Hawn's cache! Doggone, he had the directions to his cache in plain sight on the backs of those cards, an' nobody caught on. How the heck did he get cards like that?"

"Probably made the drawing himself," suggested Terry. "Had a plate made, and the special deck printed just for himself."

Down the valley a short distance came the wails of a man in the throes of delirium. Eagle Hawn. And he was babbling about his lucky cards.

"Go, Terry," spoke the Kid. "Ride like the wind. Get out of here quick. Get a bunch of reliable men an' go for the gold. There are a lot of folks needin' that dinero. Hurry. Hawn is liable to give away the secret. The Hordemen are swell gents, but they're human. The chance for sudden wealth is apt to turn any man's head, so run. Get away, because I'm too weak to help if one of the bunch goes hog-crazy with greed. They're bitter men, Terry. Ride, girl! Go!"

"I must take Hawn back," the girl said. "He is my prisoner."

The Kid shook his head. "No, Terry. Hawn had proved himself. He's one of the bunch now. He rides with Calvert's Horde."

Deep hurt was expressed in the girl's eyes. "And you, Kid Calvert, you're of the hated Horde—you who can be so kind. You're a bandit. You mock the law. Some day you will be my prisoner. But now—I can't forget what you have done." She stopped, stifled a sob. "Oh, why, why must there be so much bad in a person who can be so good?"

Tears welled in her eyes. She swung around, ran for her horse, and soon the hoofbeats dwindled into the murmur of the wilderness. Though the Horde was gathered here, crushing loneliness pressed down on the Kid. Terry was gone.

Hawn's delirium broke out anew. Little did the man know that in worldly goods, he was as poor now as the poorest peon. And little did he know that he had won the proudest honor of the owl-hoot. He was a member of the Horde—hell's recruit.

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The name of Klug meant something on the cattle ranges. When a rancher heard it, he turned out his boys with guns. When a homsteader heard it, he barred his door. When a sheriff heard it, he called for a posse and a noose. And when young Dan Bartel heard it, he found himself snagged in a killer trap of—

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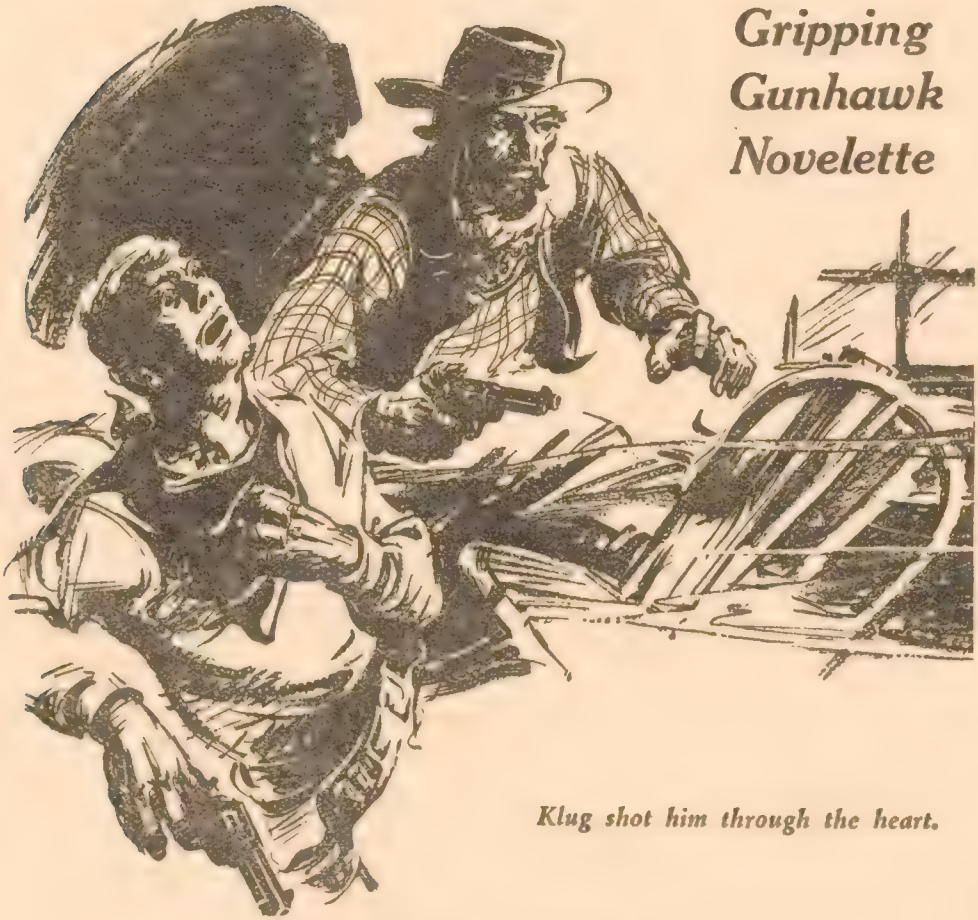


Klug shot him through the heart.

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Author of "Fugitive from Hell"

THE rider brought his chestnut horse back on its hocks in a stop as sudden as though he had run against a stone wall. While the chestnut snorted in protest and spun completely around, the man in the kak stared at an hombre who stood against the rocky ledge that walled in one side of the trail. He was a medium-sized, wiry-looking individual with dark, piercing eyes and a

face that seemed to taper from the forehead to the chin like a wedge. A star glittered on his vest.

"Reckon I'm glad tuh meet up with yuh," the man on foot began, grinning. "Need help."

"Sheriff, huh?" the rider of the chestnut said lazily. "Where is your bronc?"

"Down the trail a ways," was the reply. "Didn't want tuh advertise my arrival. What's your name?"

"Bartel. Dan Bartel."

Even though the horseman sat a saddle, the man with the star noted the deepness of his chest, the length and strength of limb, the clean-cut lines and easy movements like a greyhound. There was a healthy tan to his features which the dust of the trail could not hide. His square chin barely betrayed the soft down that promised some day to be a man-sized beard.

A glint of humor shone in Bartel's gray eyes.

"Glad tuh help yuh out," the young rider said and dismounted.

"I'm Sheriff McFee," said the other. "Got two bad hombres holed up in a shack just around the bend. Reckon I got tuh have a man climb the rocks, circle around, an' git in the back to attract their attention. They'll be watchin' the front mostly. I'll sneak up an' keep cover behind boulders while yuh git around to the winder an' throw down on 'em. I reckon yuh're my deputy for the time bein', son. Yuh look plumb up to the job."

Dan Bartel grinned.

"If yuh hear shots," the sheriff went on, "don't lose your head. It'll be me attractin' their fire from the front."

Bartel nodded, then clambered up the rocks. The man with the badge started up the rise cautiously. On top of the rocky wall, Dan Bartel could look down on the roof of a shack in a small clearing close to the top of the ridge. With painstaking care he began to maneuver toward it.

In a few minutes he was lowering himself down the rocks in the rear of the shack. Halfway down he spotted the sheriff slipping from the cover of a clump of jackpine to the lee of a huge rock not fifty yards from the door of the hut. Bartel grinned.

This baiting of badmen gave him a thrill. Carefully he slid to the flat ground, then ran toward the little window in the back of the shack. It was nothing more than a hole in the rude shelter covered by weather-beaten tarpaulin. Dan Bartel drew a gun, flicked the curtain aside with the barrel and cracked out: "Freeze!"

Two men started violently. One whirled and fired. A bullet tore splinters out of the window casing. But Bartel had ducked. Before he could straighten again he heard a heavy boot thud against the door, send it crashing inward. A six-gun roared twice. A fearful gasp came from the gloomy interior of the shack. Dan Bartel ran around to the front.

"Well, sheriff," he grinned, looking in through the door, "we—" His words rattled back into his throat as the man with the badge whirled and leveled his gun. There was a small sack in his free hand. A man with gray whiskers lay on the floor. Another writhed close to the old iron stove.

"Steady," a deadly voice warned Bartel. "Lift them hands, feller! Reckon there ain't enough dust here for two of us." The man with the star laughed mockingly. The killer light in his eyes sent Bartel's hands aloft. Instantly the man stepped close, flicked the young fellow's guns from their holsters. He dropped them to the ground and kicked them into the bushes near by.

"Adios!" the killer gritted. "If yuh meet up with a real sheriff, tell him yuh met Klug!"

His brain stunned by realization of what had occurred, Dan Bartel watched the outlaw back fast down the declivity in the trail toward the spot where he had left his horse. Klug! The name chilled Bartel. Everybody in the Southwest had heard of Klug.

Suddenly, as the outlaw turned and leaped around a bend, young Bartel gal-

vanized into action. He clawed for his guns in the bushes, straightened, and lunged down the trail. A gun boomed. A bullet sliced the air close to him, sending him crabwise toward shelter. He looked back at the shack. A man stood there, gun in hand, the other hand clutching the door jamb for support. From that distance Dan Bartel could see that one cheek was splotched with blood.

Dan Bartel jumped away from the rock and started for his horse. His hat fell off, baring a thatch of flaming red hair. Another slug kicked dust into his eyes as he whirled and got the hat. A curse rolled down from the man at the shack, followed by the sound of another shot.

The redheaded rider reached his chestnut horse and vaulted to the saddle. The animal leaped away and thundered down the ridge to the tableland below. Cursing with fury, heart cold at the way he had been duped, Dan Bartel had one thought —to put as much mileage between himself and the scene of the crime as possible in a short time. He knew there would have been no use to explain to the old man who had survived.

MANY days later, many miles to the south, Dan Bartel jerked the chestnut horse to a stop at the edge of a line of timber. Gone was the glint of humor from his gray eyes. In its place the wary gleam that is ever present in the eyes of the hunted. Swiftly the news had spread. "Watch for Klug! And a red-haired hombre ridin' with him!"

Days of dodging beaten paths and towns had sent Dan Bartel riding over owl-hoot trails, and had led him farther away from the clime which had been his goal on the long ride from the north. Only the fleetness of the splendid animal beneath him had saved Bartel from capture. He was marked by a flaming brand, that shock of brick-hued hair topping his youthful face. An outlaw wanted for cold-blooded murder, a man stamped as Klug's partner. Klug, Bartel realized bitterly, must have killed a sheriff to have filched a badge.

"Reckon yuh can't git no more rest than me," he said now to the stout-hearted horse, leaning forward to pat the animal. "We got to keep movin', old feller. Yuh're carryin' somethin' that's wanted mighty bad." The horse trembled a little at Bartel's touch. Its hide was sweat-soaked, its nostrils distended.

Face hard, the young rider urged his horse on across a flat stretch covered with bunch grass and stunted vegetation. The sun was going down, its flaming rays bathing the higher peaks and crags with a splash of color. It dyed the water of a distant wriggling stream so that it seemed a chain of golden lightning. Dan rode leisurely now, giving his chestnut bronc a chance to win back spent energy.

The country was silent, brooding, vast. A subdued hush was in the air. The trail began to snake along the shelving bank of a river and he followed it for perhaps half a mile. Suddenly the whicker of a horse tightened every muscle in Bartel's body.

The young rider brought his chestnut horse almost to its haunches with a vicious jerk of the reins. He caught a movement near a clump of willows a few yards ahead as he drew his gun. Now he could see the animal. It was a roan horse with its head lowered to the ground to nuzzle something that was sprawled out on the trail. Again the roan whickered and raising its head, began to mill about restlessly. Dan Bartel rode up cautiously. The chestnut shied as it spotted the motionless heap on the ground.

"It's an hombre an' hurt bad by the looks," mumbled the red-haired rider. As he climbed down from the saddle, a groan came from the prostrate figure. Dan saw a hand rise weakly and heard a whispered *"señor."*

Young Bartel knelt down and lifted the man's head from the hard shale. He looked close at a swarthy face. Death was beginning to blanch it. A pair of dark eyes opened slowly. The hard mouth under a long, graying mustache was twisted wtih pain. Blood splotched the shirt at the Mexican's chest.

"Take it easy," said Bartel. "Who got you?"

The Mex struggled to sit up, began to mutter. "*Señor*—help me, *si?* On my horse, *señor*—two mile—a *padre* live—*Señor*, I go fast— You take me to *padre*, eh? Help me on horse, *si, señor?*"

"Sure, pardner, sure," Dan Bartel said soothingly. With difficulty he got the wounded Mex to his feet, half dragged him to the roan. He lifted the man into the gaudy Mexican saddle, shoved his toes in the studded tapaderos of the stirrups. Then he got onto his own chestnut horse and led the roan along the trail.

Several minutes had passed when Bartel turned in his saddle. The Mex was mumbling incoherently. A hand came up with extreme effort and waved away from the trail. Bartel's eyes followed in that direction. Below, at the foot of a ridge, stood a dobe shack. So he swung off the trail and led the roan down a steep wash.

Once the Mex almost fell from the saddle. The sound of tumbling pebbles and the metallic click of iron-shod hoofs against the rocks brought a man to the door before Dan Bartel had got the wounded man to the foot of the descent. The man was silhouetted against the lamplight, a tall, white-haired churchman clad in a long black garment that caused Bartel's eyes to widen. A large crucifix dangled from a sash at his waist.

"Evenin', padre," Dan said softly. "I found this man on the trail. He's bad hurt. Wanted to get to you." As he dismounted, Dan removed his hat. The glowing light of the fiery sunset played on his hair. The white-headed man looked at him closely.

"Come in," he said then. "Can I help you, *señor*, with the—"

"I'll manage," replied Bartel. "There's blood, yuh know." He eased the wounded man out of the saddle and to the ground. As the Mexican's boots hit the dirt, his eyes opened. He gazed at the padre and the death mist lifted from his eyes. Leaning against Bartel, he was dragged into the adobe hut. There he was laid on a rude pallet and the padre knelt over him. Bartel backed away and went outside.

From inside the adobe hut came the indistinct babbling of the Mex. Bartel heard the padre talk in low tones. There followed an awesome silence. Then Bartel heard the padre's voice, low, intoning. The scratching of a pen cut in on the Mexican's laborious breathing. Finally the padre came to the door and called to Dan Bartel. Hat in hand, the red-haired young man went inside. The Mexican was dead. He lay with a crucifix clasped to his breast. For the first time Bartel noted that the dead man's temples were flecked with white.

"He is at peace," spoke the padre. "You were most kind, *señor*, to help this poor soul. He gave thanks to you before passing. The Tamale Kid was his name. Strange for a man of his age to be called so."

"An outlaw?"

THE churchman nodded, looking straight into Dan Bartel's eyes. His gaze then lifted to the crop of red hair.

Bartel grinned coldly. "Yes, give a dog or an hombre a bad name—" He turned his eyes away; they fell upon a long envelope that lay by the lamp on the table. A name was scrawled upon it. Except for his long experience with the surprises in life, the padre would have exclaimed aloud at the expression in Dan Bartel's eyes. It was a look of incredulity. The red-haired owl-hoot rider snatched up the envelope and read the name Margarita Calhoun.

"Y-you know her, perhaps?" queried the padre.

Bartel's lean frame relaxed. He slid his tongue along his dust-ringed lips and looked at the speaker. "I thought for a minute— But I guess I must be mistaken. It's a Spanish name, Margarita—"

"It would be Margaret in English," supplied the padre. "It is a confession, son. The Tamale Kid wanted to atone for—"

"Did he say where she could be found?" Bartel interrupted anxiously.

"Did he mention the Three Sevens Ranch —Clune City?"

The padre started perceptibly this time, his cavernous eyes incredulous. "Our poor brother had no strength to write the rest," he explained. "He whispered those words. They were his last. Three Sevens—Clune City. Son, I am going to trust you to bear that message to that woman. I have a feeling that it should not be sent by any other messenger. The envelope I have sealed. I know you will not break it. The contents are only for the eyes of the woman addressed."

"I'll take it there," Dan Bartel said. "I—" He turned toward the pallet where the Mex lay. "I'll help you with him, padre. Have you a spade—or something?"

Some time later young Bartel took his leave. He gripped the padre's hand, looked over toward the fresh mound of earth, then climbed into the saddle and rode into the night. His brain was awhirl and a baffled expression rested in his gray eyes. What strange quirk of fate had sent him over those owl-hoot trails to stumble onto the sprawled figure of a Mexican badman?

Into a hut where a name had been written, one that was burned in Dan Bartel's brain as if by red-hot branding iron. Margaret Calhoun! Somewhere up near Clune City near the border of New Mexico—the Three Sevens Ranch!

Dan Bartel smiled coldly as he rode on, for the thought had come suddenly that he was a doubtful candidate to be carrying a deathbed confession to Clune City. But the lean-jawed, bronze face grew set. That letter would go through in spite of all the sheriffs in the Southwest. Bartel wanted to meet a man named Dekker in Clune City. He hoped that Dekker had not been swept along on the sands of time to another part of the country. Ten years can be a long, long time.

Yet there would be some people in Clune City who would remember Sam and Margaret Calhoun—and Dekker. But the Tamale Kid? Dan Bartel had never heard that name. No doubt he had been but one of many *malo* hombres who had infested the range in those days when Sam Calhoun lived.

The story had seemed straight enough when Bartel had heard it from Margaret Calhoun's lips. After Sam Calhoun had gone down before the roar of forty-fives, his wife left the range. Born a part of the rugged country, Margaret Calhoun had sworn that she would never set foot on it again.

She had gone to 'Frisco, and there had lived for a few years in comparative seclusion, embittered at the world, especially that part of it where Sam Calhoun had been destroyed. But the city had robbed her of the health that the open-range country had endowed her with, and weeks ago she had appeared at the Bartel place in Montana, a thin, cough-racked woman, keeping alive on her courage alone. It was young Dan Bartel whom Margaret Calhoun had called to during her last hours.

"You're my brother's boy," she had whispered hoarsely. "I want to tell you about Sam Calhoun. Sam drank heavily but he could hold his whiskey like the man he was. He gambled, Sam did. Everybody gambled in Clune City in them days—at Dekker's place. Dekker won the ranch at cards. Sam came home that night and he couldn't talk—seemed like he was all bewildered.

"Yes, he had been drinking. The next day Sam found out that he had signed over the ranch to Dekker—a ranch with seven thousand head of stock. Sam told Dekker it was a lie, but there was his signature on the paper Dekker took out of his safe. I guess Sam went crazy, Dan. He called Dekker names—names that can only be backed up with a gun.

"Dekker was fast with a six-gun. He killed Sam—killed him right out in the street. It was a fair fight, but somehow I don't believe that Sam Calhoun deliberately signed the ranch away. Not when he was thinkin' of me. And Sam Calhoun loved me, Dan. You see, there is something I can't understand. But it was his signature. I saw it, Sam's

scrawlin' writin'— And the ranch would have belonged to you, Dan—if Dekker—"

Dan Bartel could see himself now. He had nodded, and the rashness of youth had brought a glint to his eyes and a tightness to his mouth. He had promised to go out and try to vindicate Margaret Calhoun's belief in her husband. He had sworn to her that he would learn the truth.

There was nothing in Montana to hold Dan Bartel. He was young, footloose, gripped with a wanderlust and a purpose. And so he had strapped on his guns and ridden away.

THE trail led north and Dan Bartel followed it. Two days later toward mid-afternoon, he was riding into Clune City. It was the average frontier town; several buildings clustered together, smaller ones dotting the landscape beyond the outskirts. Apart from the rest was a large sheep-shearing shed.

"Reckon that makes for trouble," Dan said with a grin. "Cows an' sheep on the same range."

A few miles back Dan had dusted with alkali the hair which was visible under his hat brim. The hat he wore well down over his eyes. Once or twice, back along the trail, he had run into lawmen. It had meant leaving the direct trails to Clune City, so that both he and the chestnut horse were weary from the hard going.

Bartel rode up to the saloon, tied his bronc fast, and strode into the reeking place. Several men stood at the bar. The new arrival realized that trouble would be the easiest thing to find in Clune City, judging by the hard-bitten features of these riders. He went to the bar, and the man behind the counter thrust a bottle toward him. He looked at Bartel close, then grinned crookedly.

"That's whiskey, young feller," he drawled. "Think yuh kin throw it? With that soft beard—"

Raucous laughter greeted the sally. Bartel turned to the man nearest him and stared at the ugly features. The fellow's nose was long and crooked. Beady eyes, close set, looked back insolently.

"Think yuh'll know me when yuh see me ag'in?" he spat through a colorless slash of mouth. "Wearin' guns, too, ain't he?" The last sneering remark was addressed to the barkeep.

Dan Bartel smiled and poured a little whiskey into a glass. Then he filled it up with water. The comment, as he drank, was baiting.

"Anybody ever hear of Margaret Calhoun?" he thrust out suddenly. Conversation died. The barkeep's eyes widened a trifle. The hand that had been pushing a sodden towel over the wet surface of the bar froze.

"Calhoun?" he repeated. "Reckon I used to know her, yep." He looked sidewise toward a door that led to a back room. "Sam Calhoun used ter run the Three Sevens. Margaret Calhoun was his wife. Say, who are yuh? What yuh askin' 'bout her for?"

"Name's Bartel," replied Dan easily. "Just interested. Got a message for her, if she's around." As he spoke, his glance was drawn to the open door not ten feet away. A man stood framed in the aperture, a tall hombre with a broad, stony face.

Save for silver splotches at his temples, his hair was jet-black. He was garbed in a long-skirted coat the color of his hair. Black trousers were tucked into tooled riding boots. As Dan Bartel met the stranger's glance, he felt as if an electric shock had run through him. The eyes glittered.

"Yuh mentioned a name," the man purred. "Reckon mebbe I kin give yuh some help. I'm 'Ace' Dekker! Heerd yore name. Bartel, eh?"

"Yep," said Dan, "Bartel." As he spoke, he gripped Dekker's hand. The man's fingers seemed to writhe in his grip like snakes. Dekker's eyes were probing.

"Margaret Calhoun, yuh said," Dekker spoke. "A message? Who from?"

Dan Bartel stepped back involuntarily. "A gent by the name of the Tamale Kid," he said easily. "Ever hear of him?"

Dekker's cold eyes tried vainly to hide a startled gleam. His big body seemed to draw up, but it was the man's fingers that betrayed his emotions. They curled, spread wide, balled into hard, formidable fists.

"Nope," said Dekker, after a moment. "I was here when the Calhouns was here. Jim Bridgeman owns the place now. I'd knowed it if the Tamale Kid had any truck with the Calhouns. I don't figger Sam Calhoun never had anything to do with a Mex."

"Reckon the Tamale Kid is dead," Bartel went on. "Seems like he wanted to let Margaret Calhoun know somethin' before he went out. I heard about Calhoun gamblin' his ranch away, Dekker. Yuh—"

"Yuh heard right," Dekker flashed back, then smiled. "Sam Calhoun never was lucky. Got reckless that night—" He turned from Dan Bartel and walked slowly back into the room from which he had emerged.

The gimlet-eyed man next to Bartel sidled away. Others shuffled toward the door. A premonition of danger gripped the young stranger. Gunmen! He had spotted them all.

Slowly he drank his liquor. When his glass was drained, he turned deliberately and walked toward the door. As he was about to go through, the hook-nosed man came in again. He bumped Bartel hard, cursed. The epithet that jerked from his lips blanched the young man's tanned face, sent him striking for his guns. The smoke-wreathed room shook as a forty-five roared. The hook-nosed individual's gun clattered to the floor. He staggered back, mouth open ludicrously, eyes staring at the smashed finger of his gunhand.

Apparently the lightning-fast play had momentarily stunned the semicircle of hard-eyed men who backed the hombre with the gimlet eyes. Guns half-drawn, they stood as if paralyzed, staring at Bartel.

"Serle!" somebody whispered raspingly. "He—he beat—Serle to the draw!"

DAN BARTEL'S eyes glittered as he moved slowly forward. He saw the gaze of Serle's henchmen shift swiftly toward that door leading to the room in the rear of the saloon. Awe had faded from their hard features when they swung their eyes back to Bartel again.

Five men against one. Dan knew that they would get him before he could get them all. A wild hunch seized the red-haired rider. Close to the entrance door he stopped, faced the crouching gunmen deliberately. Quickly a hand reached up, tore the wide-brimmed hat from his head.

"Reckon yuh can start throwin' lead," he rapped out. "I'll git a couple of yuh. But Klug'll come for the payoff!"

From somewhere behind Bartel came a sharp intake of breath. Serle, shattered gunhand held close to his chest, was gaping at the shock of flaming red hair. The killers had stiffened, guns still in their holsters. Dan Bartel laughed, put on his hat, and backed out of the saloon. At the hitchrack, he yanked his bronc loose, swung to saddle. Men crowded the open door of the saloon as he thundered out of Clune City.

Ace Dekker looked at Serle, a thin smile on his lips. "Fast, ain't he?" Then he turned and walked away.

Dan Bartel headed out toward the range lands with a tumult of thoughts running riot in his head. He was sure now that the Tamale Kid had known Dekker. The gambler's stony front had crumbled for a moment at the mention of the Calhoun name. Serle? What had prompted Serle's deadly play? Had Dekker ordered the move?

Dan sensed that he had. And his own wild hunch, mention of the name, Klug, had been his ticket to freedom. The young rider knew that it had been a reckless gesture. If Klug was around Clune City, no doubt he had spilled the story of the red-haired gent he had met up with on the killing trail.

Grimly certain now that the lawless held Clune City and the surrounding terrain in a tight grip, Dan Bartel rode toward Three Sevens ranch. On the way

he passed bands of cattle and grazing sheep. Sheep and cattle; they mixed like water and oil. The rider went from a benchland and slipped down a slanting trail to a deep coulee.

This led out to bottom land through which wound a big stream bordered with willows and cottonwoods. And a quarter of a mile further on, around a bend, Dan Bartel came upon the Three Sevens spread. The ranch buildings were snuggled close to a bluff that protected them from the winter winds.

Some distance away were pens for cattle that were brought in for the bitter months. Near the edge of a thicket of scrub pine was a horse corral with a snubbing post in the center. In the shadows cast by this thicket, Dan Bartel drew up his chestnut horse and reached for the makings.

A fitful wind soughed through the scrub pine, whipped up dust from the ranch yard. Subdued voices drifted over to him. There was a light gleaming from the window of the bunkhouse. A man crossed from an outbuilding to the ranch-house. A horse whickered.

"Don't move!" The voice came from behind Dan Bartel. As he stiffened slightly, then raised his hands high, it occurred to Dan that the command was a little forced.

"Get off your horse!"

Bartel obeyed, a slight smile appearing on his tight lips. The voice was a woman's. Once his boots touched the loam, Dan turned slowly. A girl stood in the shadows, clutching a rifle in her hands. The business end of the weapon was pointed straight at Dan's belt buckle as she advanced.

"Reckon I don't mind takin' orders from you, nope," he grinned.

The white face that came nearer showed little consciousness of the compliment. Dark eyes met Bartel's gray ones and flashed angrily. She seemed very young. Her hat had been pushed back, revealing a dark mass of fluffy hair that accentuated the delicate beauty of her white face.

Although it was dark, Dan Bartel was sure that her lips would be the color of a red rose and was certain that her eyes would be velvety. A woolen blouse and leather riding skirt were her garments and she wore small leather boots.

"Reckon you can talk to dad," she snapped. "Snoopin', weren't you, cowboy? Serle send you?"

"S-Serle?" gasped Bartel. "Yuh know—"

"I thought so," the girl clipped. "Spyin'. Get goin' and if yuh think I wouldn't shoot, just try me."

"Oh, I ain't doubtin' it a bit," grinned her prisoner, as he started across the ranch yard. "Yuh look pretty desp'rate to me. Never met a more bloodthirsty-lookin' character."

The young man's smile was devastating. The rifle in the girl's grasp wavered briefly. But it was thrust forward to thump against Bartel's ribs almost instantly. He let out a painful protest.

"Reckon no bullet would've felt worse," he complained. "There ain't nothin' gentle about yuh."

His captor said nothing as she herded him toward the ranch-house and in through the door. Two men rose out of their chairs. One was tall, gray-haired, with gaunt features that were weather-beaten and lined. But about the mouth which was almost hidden by a heavy mustache was a kindly expression. It lost its softness, however, as the cattleman flashed a piercing glance at Dan Bartel.

"Reckon yuh're Jim Bridgeman," Dan spoke first. "The lady—she—er—your daughter I take it—she plumb was anxious tuh have us meet." As he spoke, Dan removed his hat. Bridgeman eyed him coldly.

"Red-haired cuss," he snapped. "Seems I heerd somethin' about a gent with a brick top was wanted over—"

"I caught him out in the pines," the girl interrupted, "spyin'! He's one of Serle's gang, Dad. I'm sure of it."

"Good work, Nan," the cattleman complimented his daughter. "I'll send for the sheriff. Reckon maybe we can git 'im to talk."

NAN BRIDGEMAN set the rifle down, appraising her prisoner. A faint flicker of admiration appeared in her dark eyes and the smoldering hostility was swept away. She caught herself noticing the details of his clear-cut features, the natural grace of his powerful build. Biting her lips and turning her eyes away, the girl concentrated on hating this man and all he stood for.

"Bridgeman," began Bartel, "I think yuh've got me wrong. I have been ridin' an owl-hoot trail, but I ain't goin' tuh tell yuh why. I only know I was framed. By a coyote named Klug!"

Bridgeman nodded. "Been wanted for years, that outlaw."

"Reckon nobody would believe the story," Bartel went on. "It'd sound pretty thin."

"It would," affirmed Bridgeman. "What yuh doin' around this ranch?" As he made the query, he drew a gun. "Sit down, stranger. I reckon yuh're just a part of another trick of that gang tuh—Serle send yuh?"

"Serle?" repeated Dan Bartel. "I don't get yuh, Bridgeman. I never saw Serle before until I—"

The clatter of hoofs sounded outside. A few moments later a man came into the big living room of the ranch-house. Bartel looked at him briefly, then shot a glance at Bridgeman. The family resemblance was unmistakable.

"Yuh seem excited, son," drawled Bridgeman.

"Yeah," the newcomer grinned. He was about Bartel's age, a reckless-looking youngster with a spatter of freckles showing through the tan on his finely chiseled nose. He spotted Dan Bartel.

"Why it's him—the red-haired jasper!" exclaimed the younger Bridgeman. "Dad, I saw him beat Serle to the draw in Clune City tuhnight. Smashed his gunhand. Serle called him. I was outside lookin' in an'—"

The girl half rose from her chair, her eyes shooting to the guns that hung low at Bartel's hips. "A gunman," she breathed, red lips curling scornfully. "A killer—"

"I reckon yuh' wrong, ma'am," cut in Dan. "I have never killed a man."

"Then I had yuh wrong about Serle," Bridgeman begrudgingly admitted. "But yuh don't look like a puncher. Nan's right. A gunman. Heerd there was a chance for a gent of yore talents hereabouts, mebbe?"

"I still don't get yuh," said Dan Bartel. "I'm not free tuh tell yuh why I'm at the Three Sevens, but yuh'll find out in time."

The other man who had been with Bridgeman and who had remained silent thus far got up to go.

"Jim," he spoke, "I sabe why yuh're so cussed unreasonable with sheepmen. Yuh think we're bringin' in killers like this jasper here tuh force a free range. Yuh think Serle is workin' for us. Yuh're wrong, Jim Bridgeman. Them sheep never got over the deadline two nights ago because we sheepmen wanted 'em to. It wa'n't us that killed two of yore riders, Bridgeman. I'd hoped yuh'd see it my way. But I'm tellin' yuh again, we ain't got no gunmen the like of Serle's gang workin' for us. Yuh'll find out."

"All right, Chalmers," Jim Bridgeman said, lips hard, "I'll take yore word at its value. And a sheepman's word—"

Chalmers whirled, face ashen, hand clawing. Abruptly he straightened, looked long at Bridgeman, then turned away. "Im sorry, Jim," he said, on his way out. "We always was pretty good friends."

"If they ever get into the Basin," Bridgeman's voice boomed, "it won't be a mistake. The cattlemen will wipe yuh out!"

Dan Bartel noted Bridgeman's despairing expression as he slumped into a chair.

"Maybe Bob Chalmers is dead on the level," the younger Bridgeman said. "You were pretty hard, Dad."

The cattleman got to his feet, eyes blazing. "Three thousand head of stock gone, Phil," he roared at his son. "Did they evaporate? What's behind it? And now sheep are crowdin' in. Maybe it ain't Chalmers, but I'm not trustin' anyone."

"There are five hundred head of stock missin' from the north pasture since the night the sheep broke through the deadline," young Bridgeman said thoughtfully. "I wonder if there's a connection."

"Reckon yuh've said somethin'," Dan Bartel remarked. "I'd like tuh throw in with yuh, Phil—"

Nan Bridgeman rose, eyes flashing. Jim Bridgeman stabbed a finger at the door.

"Get out," he snapped at Bartel. "We don't want the likes of you stringin' along with the Bridgemans. I figger yuh're lucky I didn't send for the sheriff, but I ain't one tuh turn in even a skunk. Git out an' ride fast!"

Dan Bartel thought quickly. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the letter the padre had given him.

"Maybe this'll clear things up," he said. "I've—" His words slipped back into his throat. The drum roll of hoofs shook ranch-house. Voices cut the air. The girl sprang to the window. She stared out, then jerked her head around.

"It's the sheriff," she said low, and brought a hand to her throat in a startled manner. Briefly she looked into Dan Bartel's face.

"Out the back way," she whispered then. "No—hide somewhere. In—" She bit her lips hard, threw back her head. "Reckon I'm being a fool. They'd catch a killer like you sooner or later."

But Dan Bartel read the concern in her eyes. His heart raced. Quickly he stepped to her side and held the envelope out.

"Please, ma'am," he spoke, "keep it for me. I'm trustin' yuh. I reckon certain hombres would spill blood to git it. Hide it for me, will yuh?"

A DELICATE hand, tanned by the sun, took the envelope. Nan Bridgeman's eyes met Bartel's and held. A strange light glowed in them. The girl knew that part of herself had the urge to trust this man, to help him. Yet another part of her rebelled.

"I'll keep it—for you," she said softly, scarcely conscious of her words. The door was whisked open. Three men strode into the room. Guns covered Dan Bartel.

"Reckon I ain't hard tuh take," he said. "Who sent yuh, sheriff?"

"I heard yuh was shootin' up Clune City," the sheriff snapped. "Heard yuh was headed this way. Come on, redhead. Mebbe yuh'll be tempted tuh tell us where Klug is when we show yuh a nice new rope. Git goin'!"

Dan Bartel shrugged, looked at Nan Bridgeman. The girl stood against the wall, dark eyes opened wide. Her hands were hidden behind her.

Phil Bridgeman spoke. "Redhead, I reckon mebbe I'm loco but yuh look all wool an' a yard wide tuh me."

"Thanks," Bartel said briefly. He walked toward the door but his eyes were still fixed upon Nan. A strange feeling engulfed him as her dark eyes softened. It was not altogether a surge of gratitude. "Good-by," he said to her. "Reckon nothin' can stop me from comin' back."

When the door had closed, when the sound of hoofs had died, Nan Bridgeman slowly raised the envelope to read the scrawled writing on its face. Her brows knitted as she stared at the name, and her lips parted with an expression of puzzlement.

"Margarita Calhoun," she read to Jim Bridgeman, her father. "Dad, wasn't that the name of the woman who lived here—before we—"

The cattleman thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yep, it was Margaret Calhoun. Now what would that badman be doin' with a letter with her name on it?"

"That hombre ain't no killer," declared Phil Bridgeman. "He ain't stringin' with Serle nor nobody else. He's too clean-cut an'—"

"Phil's right, I bet," the girl said to her father. "I believe what he said. Dad, will they hang him? No, they mustn't, Dad. You've got to help."

Bridgeman looked at his daughter, a sly smile playing on his lips. The girl's face flamed. With an exasperated cry she ran from the room.

"Knew she'd act up like that some

day," the cattleman remarked good-naturedly to his son. "But I'm damned if I thought she'd start in when she met up with a posse dodger!" He shook his head, drew a horny palm down over his face and yawned. "She'll have tuh git over it."

"I still say Bartel looks ace-high tuh me," insisted his son.

The Clune City jail was built of dobe and was attached to the frame part of the building which served as the sheriff's office. The arrival of the posse with the prisoner caused no little stir in town. Ace Dekker stood in the doorway of his place as the horses loped by. A pleased grin was on his face. Dan Bartel looked at him. The prisoner's lips twisted. It was evident that Dekker had tipped off the sheriff, the gambler having surmised that Bartel would strike for the Three Sevens Ranch.

As he was ordered to dismount, Dan Bartel wondered if Serle's play had been prompted by mention of Margaret Calhoun. He thanked his lucky stars that the confession was safe in the hands of Nan Bridgeman. Serle, according to Bridgeman, was known to be a bad hombre. The cattleman had inferred a strong suspicion that he was a rustler. Four thousand head of stock stolen from the Three Sevens Ranch.

Dan Bartel smiled coldly. That should have Bridgeman in quite a hole. Yet Dan was sure that Serle was not the leader of the gang that was forcing a sheep war, that was rustling Three Sevens cattle. The major portion of Serle's brains was in his gunhand and not behind his ugly face. Dan Bartel had the feeling that his arrival on the Clune City scene had been startling.

His casual questions in the saloon hours before, his mention of the Tamale Kid, had been like an explosion. He knew that it was the reason for his incarceration. Yet Dan did not regret his reckless entry into Clune City, for it had led him to Nan Bridgeman. The fact that he could not get the girl out of his mind amazed the owl-hoot rider.

No woman other than his mother had ever aroused a feeling of tenderness. But in the dark-haired girl, he felt that he had discovered something fine and noble. Without her, life would never be complete.

Dan Bartel's musings were interrupted by the sheriff who was accompanied by Ace Dekker. They entered the jail and walked up to the bars.

"Reckon yuh'll tell us where Klug is?" said the sheriff. The man was not a hard-looking person, Bartel thought. Dekker, however, eyed the prisoner coldly, assuming an air of casual interest.

"I can't tell yuh what I don't know," Dan said easily. "Reckon a lot of lawmen are barkin' up the wrong tree. I'd like tuh meet Klug myself, sheriff—more than yuh have any idea."

"It'd go easier for yuh, kid," the grizzled officer growled persuasively, "if yuh turn the coyote in."

"They go for a rope suddenlike in Clune City," drawled Ace Dekker.

DAN BARTEL smiled. "Sheriff, yuh've been 'round these parts for quite a spell, I take it. Ever hear of a badman by name of the Tamale Kid?"

Ace Dekker's eyes did not change expression. Bartel, however, saw those long thin fingers twitch.

"The Tamale Kid?" the sheriff repeated. "Why, yes, seems I do recollect the cuss. Quite an educated Mex, seems tuh me. Used his talents the wrong way. Spent five years up for forgery. He was a wizard copyin' gents' signatures, forged a minin' claim, an'—"

"Thanks," said Bartel. "I begin tuh see—"

"Yuh begin tuh see what?"

"Nothin'," replied the prisoner. "Well, if yuh hang me, sheriff, give me a rope that don't tickle."

The officer swore and stamped out. Dekker trailed him, failing to look back.

Time passed. Clune City became deathly quiet. Dan Bartel stood near the small window of his cell and looked out at the stars. Despite imminent danger, the young owl-hoot rider could not divert his thoughts from Nan Bridgeman. No

doubt she, too, had heard about the redheaded outlaw who had ridden with Klug, and Dan could not blame her for believing the worst. Yet his heart leaped joyously as he recalled how she had pleaded with him to hide, to get away.

A chill coursed over Dan Bartel's body as a thought struck him. An uncanny intuition that things were going to break wide open in the street outside. Bridgeman had said that an element more powerful than the law was working in the county. The prisoner's thoughts had no sooner taken this turn than they were shattered by the bark of a six-gun.

A man cursed. Again that drum roll of horses' hoofs. The walls of the jail seemed to quiver as hoofs pounded nearer. Another shot crashed out. Shouts drifted through the night air. The hoofbeats died, and outside the jail, Dan Bartel could hear the creak of leather, the subdued voices of men.

Boots thumped across the floor of the room outside. The door crashed open and four men stamped in, faces masked. Two were armed with rifles, while the other pair advanced to the cell door. One of them inserted a heavy key in the lock.

"Come on out," a muffled voice commanded Bartel. "Reckon we're in a hurry, redhead. Move, pronto! We got your bronc waitin'."

Bartel lost no time in hustling out of the jail. In front, six more men sat their horses, waiting. The released prisoner flashed a glance up the street as he climbed to his chestnut horse. The bodies of two men were sprawled on the rutted thoroughfare. In front of the saloon three horsemen were stationed, holding back the occupants with rifles.

"Come on," a voice gritted, "fork the broncs." The same rider waved to the horsemen up the street. Three shots rang out before they swerved and thundered away.

As Dan Bartel raced out of town with the raiders, he looked back momentarily. Men were pouring into the street. Guns blazed. A rider close to Bartel swayed in the saddle. He cursed and grabbed leather to save himself from toppling out of the kak. A masked horseman rode close to the redheaded range rider. Bartel looked at him closely. The man was riding with the reins gripped in his left hand, the right being crudely bandaged.

"Don't make a break!" came a metallic command from behind the mask. "Yuh'll git riddled if yuh do, Bartel!"

"Think I'm that kind of a fool?" retorted the prisoner. "Reckon yuh know what side of the law I'm on—Serle."

The rider's sneering laugh, whipped up by the wind, almost was lost on Dan Bartel. Serle reined his horse away. As the cavalcade rode swiftly across broad flats, far ahead of any posse, Bartel found time to take stock of his position. There was little doubt that Serle and his gang, in breaking him loose from the Clune City jail, had branded him more of an owl-hoot rider than ever.

They had dissipated any chance, it seemed, of his squaring himself in the eyes of honest men—and Nan Bridgeman. Serle must have wanted him badly, but why? Possibly for his speed with a gun, thought Bartel. He was now definitely outside the law, and Serle probably saw in him a powerful addition to the gang. Yet the remembrance of Serle's play hours before still rankled in Dan Bartel's mind.

A thrill cut through him at the realization that he was on the way to the stronghold of the rustlers, whose work was causing a range war. The belief that he was to meet a bigger man than Serle would not leave Bartel's mind.

The night riders crossed a shallow river, and followed a rough trail that snaked through a tumbled country. They entered the badlands where deep coulees cut back from the banks of another narrow stream. The going became difficult and the horses slowed up.

Trees and heavy underbrush began to clutter the trails. Finally Serle and his riders loped down a slanting stretch and cut into a deep ravine. They came into a large open space, three sides of which were flanked by high-flung ridges.

Rich grass grew thick on the floor of the hideout. Bartel spotted several long

buildings. From the crude chimney of one curled a ribbon of smoke. Here and there horses grazed. A few men lounged about an open fire. The headquarters of the outlaws who terrorized the range country.

SERLE rode up to Bartel again, motioning toward the largest of the buildings. The other riders dismounted and led their broncs away. Two helped the wounded outlaw from his saddle, half dragged him across the clearing.

"The boss'll be glad tuh see yuh, I reckon," said Serle in a rasping voice. "Foller me." In front of the building, he dismounted. A man dozing on the porch rose quickly. "Limpy," gritted Serle, "put these broncs in the small corral, pronto. He inside?"

"Yep," the man replied, and reached for Bartel's horse. "Gans an' Ramos are with him."

Serle opened the door and ushered Dan Bartel into a big smoke-clouded room. Three men sat around a table, cluttered with the remnants of food and several bottles. One face drew Bartel's minute attention, a wedge-shaped countenance cut with a mocking grin. It came as a distinct shock to the redheaded man. His eyes widened briefly, then hardened.

"Klug!"

"Well, well, if it ain't the redhead," smirked Klug. "Reckon yuh been gittin' famous since I met up with yuh last. Ain't holdin' nothin' against me, are yuh, 'Red'?"

Dan Bartel forced a smile to his lips and stepped toward the outlaw. "Nope," he spoke easily, "I ain't one tuh get sore over a good joke. Yuh rung a whizzer on me, though, Klug."

Klug shot a look at Serle. His eyes seemed to wear a baffled expression. "Heard yuh had a run-in with Serle," the bandit leader said. "It was him who told me what a fast gunhand yuh got. Reckon I can use yuh, Bartel. I'll square myself with yuh. A job I got in mind'll sure make up for the raw deal I give yuh that time. Got tuh feelin' kind of 'shamed of myself, Bartel. Figgered I'd get yuh out of that Clune City jail an' show yuh what a friend I kin be. Well, are yuh throwin' in?"

"Yuh don't figure I'd refuse, do yuh, Klug?" replied Bartel.

"Sit down," said Klug. "Meet Gans and Ramos. Yuh'll take orders from nobody but me."

"When do we start movin', Klug?" Gans cut in impatiently. "I'm gittin' tired of sittin' an' waitin'."

"Yuh won't wait long. In less than an hour we start ridin'," Klug said. "Everything's ready. About three o'clock we hit. The men are out there waitin'. Just about now they're throwin' down on night herders. The redhead here kind of delayed us. Got tuh give the horses a rest."

Klug's face turned toward Dan Bartel. The outlaw's lips smiled but the young rider read a deadly menace in the man's gaze. A shiver seized Bartel at the realization that no one had offered to give him a gun. He felt that an insidious, powerful design had been behind his removal from the Clune City jail.

Gans and the other outlaw walked out, muttering. Serle followed. Bartel and Klug were alone. The latter went to the door and looked out. He then crossed the room, spurs jangling, gun holsters rocking at his hips. He came to another door, swung it open.

"Reckon you an' me will have a private talk," Klug said then. "Come on in, Bartel."

The red-haired puncher followed Klug into a smaller room, which was in darkness save for the lamplight that streamed in from the big room. As Dan Bartel crossed the threshold, Klug slammed the door. A match flared in one corner of the room. Bartel saw a face momentarily, one that was familiar, a stony, broad face which wore an evil grin. Ace Dekker! He swung around to feel something prod into his stomach, to hear an icy voice.

"Stay put, Bartel," snapped Klug, "or I'll split your spine!" The room was suffused with light now.

"Yeah, be a nice feller," Dekker

clipped. "Reckon yuh think we got yuh out of that jail because we liked the color of your hair." He cursed and took a step toward Bartel. "You got somethin' I want," he lashed out menacingly. "Hand it over—pronto! A message from the Tamale Kid yuh said, didn't yuh, yuh ornery coyote?"

A maddening grin played on Dan Bartel's mouth as he eyed Dekker defiantly. "I had one," he drawled, "but it wasn't for you. I reckon I put it where it would be found in case I died suddenlike, Dekker. So yuh did know the Tamale Kid? Expert on hand-writin', I heard. I begin tuh see why yuh're gettin' so nervous, Dekker, why yuh set Serle onto me when I hit Clune City.

"Yuh've been workin' fast, you an' Klug. Maybe yuh could tell me where Bridgeman's cows are bein' hid, too. Yuh're wastin' your time, Dekker. I haven't got a thing on me. Go ahead and take a look." The redhead laughed deliberately in Dekker's face.

"He's a liar," Dekker raged. "Hold that gun on him, Klug. I'll strip him, I'll find what he's carryin'." Suiting the action to the word, Dekker rifled every pocket of Bartel's clothes, ripped at linings, even made Dan remove his boots. At length he stepped back, cursing, his face livid. In a fury he slammed a fist against Bartel's face, sent him reeling against the wall.

"Klug, give me a gun," Bartel ripped out. "I'll give him first draw—d'yuh hear?"

THE outlaw laughed. A red mist before his eyes, Dan Bartel lunged at Klug. Instantly a gun barrel crashed down on his head. Blinded by pain, brain roaring, he sank to his knees. The door slamming behind Klug and Dekker sounded like a clap of thunder.

When his brain had cleared, Dan Bartel found that instinctively he had crawled to the door of his prison. As he lay there, voices sounded in the big room outside, those of Klug and Dekker.

"We'll take care of him later," Dekker was saying. "Is everythin' set?"

"Yuh'd better drift back toward town," Klug cracked. "I'll meet yuh in Tres Pinos day after tomorrow. This thousand head we're drivin' out ought to ruin Bridgeman, Dekker. You hold two notes. Yuh can squeeze him out, but I reckon that five thousand is comin' tuh me when yuh git that ranch, sabe? Nobody crosses Klug, remember that!"

"Yuh'll git it," snapped Dekker. "It's worth the cost. I knew you was the man tuh play it big. Serle was takin' too much time. Your idea of mixin' up the sheep in it sure was smart, Klug."

Crouching against the door, Dan Bartel felt the blood pound through his frame. His brain was alert now, as clear as a bell. Sheep! And Klug and Dekker were forcing Bridgeman to the wall. The Three Sevens Ranch.

"Say," Dekker suddenly shot at Klug, "that redheaded hombre was out to Bridgeman's. Do yuh think he opened his mouth?"

Klug's answer was a curse. The boots of the two men moved away. Their voices were inaudible now. A door slammed. Dan Bartel got to his feet, thinking desperately. He knew for sure now that Dekker had tricked Sam Calhoun out of his ranch. It was a rich spread and probably had brought a handsome price when he sold it to Jim Bridgeman.

Now he was forcing Bridgeman out, stealing his cattle. The ranch would be his again. And Klug had been hired to make the play. Down at the Three Sevens the Bridgemans were ignorant of the bold raid that was to take place before another dawn.

Dan Bartel knew that sheep would go into the Basin and the word would spread. The cattlemen would send punchers to clear them out, and while all this activity was going on at the Basin, Klug and his gang would drive a herd northward, over the border. Dan Bartel frantically weighed his chances of escape, exploring the interior of the room. He had to get out.

He was sure now that he knew what the Tamale Kid had written. That paper signing over the ranch from Sam

Calhoun to Ace Dekker ten years ago had been a forgery and the concrete proof was at the Bridgeman ranch. Above all else, Dan Bartel wanted to vindicate himself in the eyes of Nan Bridgeman.

He strained his body against the door. It gave a little, but he realized that a heavy bar had been dropped down outside. He stepped back. Hoofbeats sounded outside. When the riders had gone, Bartel could hear somebody enter the big room, could hear the voices of two people. A desperate plan took root in his brain.

He walked to the table and lighted the oil lamp. The windowless room was suffused with a sickly glow. By the light Bartel could see a heap of old blankets and kindling wood in a corner. He stacked an armful of the wood against the door, tiptoed across the room for the lamp, and poured oil from it onto the wood.

With a match he ignited the dry kindling and almost instantly flame licked up and began to crackle. Smoke poured through the cracks in the door. Heart hammering, the young prisoner waited.

Dan Bartel had decided upon a risky trick. If the guards outside elected to let the place burn, he would go with it. Yet something told him that they could not risk a great fire luring horsemen to the spot. The season had been comparatively dry. Cattlemen would do anything in their power to prevent a fire from spreading over the range. Bartel's ingenuity was rewarded with the sound of curses above the crackle of the flames. Fire licked at the door to the big room.

"Let it burn," a gruff voice ripped out. "Klug don't need the place no more after tuhnight."

"Yuh damn' fool," the other grated, "every puncher in the state'll be ridin' this way when the sky shows red. We got tuh put it out. Watch that hombre close. Shoot him pronto if he makes a break. Klug'd drill us if he gets loose."

The prisoner grinned savagely, picked up the lamp again, and balanced it in his hand. He heard a bar slide away from the door. The door was pushed inward slightly. Smoke obscured the man, but Bartel could hear a curse and a cough. The door swung in. The other man, gun in hand, offered a perfect target and the red-haired rider did not waste a moment. As that door swung in, he hurled the lamp. It crushed the man's leering face and sent him sprawling. Instantly Bartel tore out of his prison and catapulted against the other guard.

The young man's careening figure bore the guard to the floor and he lost his gun to his attacker. The next moment Dan Bartel was on his feet. He brushed his hand over his eyes which smarted with wood smoke, covering the cowering outlaw with his gun. On the floor the other groaned, his face blood smeared.

Stepping over the prone figure, Bartel snatched up another gun, rammed it into an empty holster at his side. Then he backed away. Driven to desperation at the thought of Klug, the guard who had got to his feet made a lunge. But the redhead swung a fist, catching the man behind the ear. The outlaw fell against the wall, lay still.

OUTSIDE, Bartel concluded that he had figured well. There were no other riders left on guard. Klug had needed every man. He vaulted a corral fence and found his chestnut horse. The kak was hanging from a pole. Dan saddled fast and swung up.

Riding like the wind, he headed for the Box L, the nearest ranch which was five miles away. He reached the spread in time to see a dozen riders pour out through the ranch gate. Yelling crazily, Bartel thundered down upon them. He whipped off his hat and waved it around his head as he pulled up in a cloud of dust.

"Klug's drivin' Bridgeman's herd toward the border. He'll be stampeding them out of the valley by now. The Three Sevens' north pasture. Go up there. I'll ride to the Lazy S. Klug—"

"Sheep are in the Basin, yuh coyote," rasped a long-visaged, flint-eyed individual in the lead. "Every puncher's headed that way. The sheepmen have

declared war. Yuh workin' with Klug, huh? Gents, look at his carrot-top. He's—"

"I just got away from Klug," roared Bartel. "That sheep drive is a trick, I tell yuh. With every outfit down in the Basin drivin' out sheep, Klug will work fast. I reckon there's more than one man lyin' dead out there now. He's planned it for a long time, but I just got wind. Klug is backin' Serle. They're out tuh rustle a thousand head. Bridgeman's riders will work in the Basin and other punchers will head that way. For God's sake, will yuh take my word for it? Head north toward the Wolftooth River. They'll drive 'em that way and through a canyon close to the border. There'll be thirty riders with Klug!"

"Gents," a powerfully built man snapped, "I reckon I'm takin' this chap at his word. He looks plumb serious tuh me. No cuss can act that natural. Let's ride."

"Thanks," breathed Bartel. "I'm ridin' tuh the Lazy S. Look over at the sky there. Fire! That's Klug's hideout. I set it tuh burnin'. It'll mark the nearest way for yuh. Adios!"

Dan Bartel spoke to his chestnut bronc and the animal surged forward. On top of a ridge he pulled up for a brief moment. Before him stretched the great open range bathed in the light of a half moon. For miles and miles the great panorama stretched. Across the flats a mile away moved a dark mass. Riders. Bartel sent the chestnut on again at the height of its speed. He sensed that the Lazy S punchers were riding to the Basin, that great depression of grazing land fully thirty acres square.

Dan Bartel cut across the intervening space and began to shout. He dipped down a long slope, cut through a fringe of cottonwoods, and standing upright in the stirrups, thundered down upon the group of riders, a great shout welling from his throat.

"Don't go tuh the Basin! Bridgeman's outfit will handle those sheep. There's no sheepherders there. They don't know a thing about it. The Box L is ridin' toward Wolftooth River tuh head off Klug. Klug drove them sheep in to cover up his theft of a thousand cattle. Send a man after the sheriff.

"I just escaped from Klug's hideout. Sure, I'm Bartel, the red-haired gent. Klug lifted me from jail for a purpose. Reckon yuh'll find out when we meet up with the rustlers. Just follow me tuh the Three Sevens' north range. I'll prove to yuh I'm on the level, hombres. Yuh'll have time tuh cut back tuh the Basin."

"Reckon we will," snapped a grizzled cattleman. "And if it's a trick, yuh'll be buzzards' breakfast before the sun comes up. Ride ahead an' we'll follow up."

Mile after mile the riders sped in the wake of Klug and his band. Once Bartel stopped and pointed to the muddy bed of an arroyo. It had been churned up by hundreds of hoofs.

"They're bunched an' going fast!" he yelled. "Do you think I am stringin' yuh now?" Even as he spoke, the sounds of gunfire could be heard. It reverberated from distant rocky walls, was wafted on the breeze to the ears of the Lazy S riders.

"The Box L!" shouted Dan. "They've stopped Klug at the river. Ride, boys, ride like hell!"

They plunged onward. Half an hour later, they broke through a stretch of timber and came in sight of a great mass of cattle milling furiously close to the bank of the river. Not fifty yards away three men dotted the turf. A riderless horse tore through the Lazy S outfit. Guns boomed upstream.

Bartel spotted more riderless horses bunched together as he led the men on to the mouth of a canyon through which the Wolftooth River ran. At the entrance, riders threw themselves from the saddles. Four men held up warning hands as Bartel advanced. A bullet chipped a rock close to the redhead and he went down on all fours.

"You was right, feller," a Box L rider yelled. "We caught 'em, though. Another hour start, an' they'd have got clean away. Got 'em holed up. A bunch

of the men have circled around an' are blockin' the other side. Klug's in there with about fifteen men. We got the rest. Do we rush 'em?" he gritted to a big man beside him.

"We do," was the cold response. "We want Klug bad. If he scales the wall, he'll git loose."

"Then I reckon this is a personal job," clipped Dan Bartel. "Klug belongs tuh me. Come on."

The men advanced, almost bent double. Twelve men, guns drawn, some holding rifles. From the gloom ahead came stabs of flame. The roar of guns echoed like thunderclaps. Bullets whined above Bartel's redhead. A few feet away, a man cursed and sank to the canyon floor. A crash of gunfire sounded far up the canyon beyond the spot where the outlaws were making a desperate stand.

"It's the rest of our bunch," yelled a Box L man. "We got 'em trapped!"

SLOWLY, relentlessly, the jaws of the trap closed. The walls of the canyon seemed to shake with the explosions of powder. Rifles and six-guns beat out a lethal chorus as Klug's men tried to shoot their way out. Finally a knot of men threw down their guns and came out into the clear, hands uplifted. Bartel counted twelve of them. A movement in the shadows to the left caught his eye and he swiveled to see a figure duck behind the spiny branches of a scrub pine.

"Come out," cracked Bartel, "or I start throwin' lead!" Three men darted to the young man's side. "Keep away," he ordered them shortly. "I'm alone on this. I think it's my friend, Klug." As he spoke, a gun roared. Bartel staggered backward as a slug bored through the flesh of his shoulder. Simultaneously the outlaw leaped clear of the scrub pine, cursing madly, his six-gun flaming destruction.

Dan Bartel had acted with equal speed and his own forty-five was spitting lead even as he steadied himself from the impact of the first shot. The wedge-faced Klug caved, went to his knees, struggled erect and reeled toward Bartel. Blood trickled down from one corner of his evil mouth. A gargoyle grin further disfigured his ghastly face. His holsters were empty.

"Reckon y-yuh got me," he gasped. "Yuh're on the l-level, Red. Yeah, b-but yuh're a dam' fool—dam' fool—" He sank to his knees, fighting off the hand of death. "Dekker—Serle—they ain't here, Red. They started for—Three Sevens—reckon they want—somethin'— Four riders with 'em." Klug tried to rise, but swayed on his knees. His life gushed out as he flopped face downward on the rocky ground.

"Dekker!" Dan Bartel screamed the name and his heart froze. Dekker and Serle were going to the Bridgeman ranch! Ace had guessed that Nan Bridgeman had that paper written by the Tamale Kid. Without a word, the redhead turned and raced along the canyon floor. A Box L man tore after him. Four of them were pressing Bartel close when he reached his chestnut horse.

"Reckon we're stringin' with yuh, feller," said one. "Yuh ain't goin' alone. Klug said there was four riders with Serle an' Dekker. Say, where does Dekker fit in with—"

"Shut up." Bartel's voice was breaking. "And ride! It's ten miles to the Bridgeman place. The men'll be out in the Basin. Nan's alone—Nan—" Bartel felt clammy fingers tear at his heart. A sob jerked from his lips as he urged the chestnut away. The Box L riders thundered along in his wake.

"I ought tuh've had more sense," the young rider stormed at himself. "I ought tuh've figured Dekker would try that. If he gets that paper—harms Nan—" The last thought brought his lips up over white teeth and a killer gleam shone in his eyes. The chestnut horse outdistanced the broncs coming on behind, and halfway to the Bridgeman ranch, the Box L riders were back fully a mile.

Despite the bronc's amazing speed, Dan Bartel's tortured mind told him that it was tiring. The objects on each side

of him seemed to crawl past. Minutes were hours. Bartel bit through his lips as he thought of Serle laying hands on Nan Bridgeman. Dekker would kill to get that envelope. It would make no difference if it was a woman who stood in his path. Dekker was facing ruin, perhaps a rope. And Serle would kill for the thrill of it.

Two more miles farther on, Dan Bartel rode along one edge of the Basin. Down in the great depression, he saw blotches of white moving among darker masses. The Three Sevens riders were still cutting sheep from the cattle. Riders rode in the midst of the milling livestock, their shouts reaching Bartel's ears.

Riding swiftly along the rim of the Basin, Bartel tore past a trio of men who were getting out of their saddles. He caught the flash of a badge as a match flared suddenly in the murk. Something was sprawled out on the ground, and the redhead's fleeting glimpse of it was enough to see a dead man.

The bawling of cattle and incessant bleat of the sheep became fainter as the chestnut horse raced at top speed away from the Basin. On top of a rise Dan glanced back. The northern sky still glowed red. In the east the first traces of breaking day appeared. Across the flats, the Box L riders were coming fast. Three more miles now!

The pace had been a killing one for the chestnut horse. Dan knew that any other bronc on the range would have caved under the grueling test. As he came within a mile of the Three Sevens, the young rider changed his course in order to get around to the butte that looked down upon the cluster of buildings. Suddenly he caught the crash of gunfire and stiffened in his kak. The chestnut seemed to understand the man's need for haste and, calling upon some hidden source of energy, stretched out.

Bartel rode in a wide circle, reached the overhanging butte and leaped from the saddle. Ducking low, he ran to the lip and looked down into the ranch yard. He saw four horses standing near the fringe of pine. Between the gate of a small corral and the ranch-house, a figure lay prone. Guns boomed and the watcher saw two stabs of flame spit from the bunkhouse door. A rifle cracked in answer, and then two figures moved in the shadows to the rear of the ranch-house.

"Hold 'em, girl!" the red-haired puncher breathed and squeezed triggers. Two men leaped out of the shadows. One went to his knees, clawed to his feet again. Three men came out of the bunkhouse, guns flaming. A drum of hoofs froze them momentarily. Dan Bartel, yelling with savage exultation, slid down the side of the butte as the Box L men thundered into the yard, guns spitting.

Searle's raiders made a desperate attempt to reach their saddles but one by one they were cut down by the Box L guns. Bartel saw the two men he had driven into the open swing around and head straight toward him. They knew that their only chance of escape lay that way. One appeared to be dragging a leg as if it were a heavy weight.

IN an avalanche of loose gravel, Bartel slid to the bottom and leaped to one side as two guns stabbed flame. He laughed madly and, off balance, answered with a terrific blast from his own guns. Above the echo of the gun's roar sounded a curse of agony. A man was on his knees. The face was a black blotch—masked. But the other, streaming profanity, came on, gripping a gun in his left hand. Serle! Bartel distinguished the catlike movements of the outlaw and the blurred ratty features of his face.

"Come on, Serle!" he shouted. "Come an' git it!"

"Damn yuh!' choked Serle. "Yuh got loose—yuh—" He fired, but Bartel's guns had crashed a split-second ahead of his. Serle rocked back as if smashed on the chest with two sledge-hammer blows. Dead on his feet, the outlaw spun around and toppled like a felled tree. The masked man was up now, dragging himself away like a wounded animal. An inarticulate babble was choked off by fear as he found

his way blocked by four horsemen. Bartel's voice thundered through the air.

"Let 'im be! Dekker belongs tuh me!"

Relentlessly the redhead herded the maimed outlaw into the ranch yard. Dekker stumbled over a body, fell to his knees. With a snarl of rage, he jerked a gun loose from a dead hand, twisted his body into a position to fire at the grim figure that stalked him. A shrill warning cry came from the door of the ranch-house, but it was drowned out by the crash of Dan's right-hand gun.

Ace Dekker uttered a choked cry as a leaden slug smashed the gun loose from his grasp. Driven to desperation by a terror that knew no bounds, he made another lunge for the gun. Again Bartel fired and this time Dekker writhed in agony from a hole drilled through the palm of his hand. He struggled to his knees, faced Bartel, the mask fallen from his face. The broad, stony features were paralyzed with terror.

"Shoot, damn yuh!" he babbled. "Git it over with. Shoot!"

"Reckon I don't want yuh tuh die yet," Dan Bartel said mercilessly. "Got tuh save yuh long enough tuh talk." He turned his head slightly to where the Box L quartet sat their saddles, faces white, eyes awe filled.

"Lift him up, drag 'im intuh the house," ordered Bartel. Then he turned toward Nan Bridgeman who stood halfway between the porch and the spot where Dekker had fallen. A rifle was still clutched in her hands. Her dark eyes revealed the effects of the ordeal she had just been through.

"Reckon I'm glad," said the redhead, walking over to her. "Mighty glad tuh see yuh. Klug told me before he went out that Dekker and Serle were headed this way. Somehow I knew yuh'd hold 'em off, Nan Bridgeman." He smiled down at her.

The rifle dropped from her fingers. She tried to speak, attempted to smile, but words would not come. Dan Bartel saved her from falling. His arms closed about her and held her for a minute. His powerful frame trembled as the wind whipped up her dark hair and the tendrils were wafted against his cheek in a soft caress. He could feel her heart beating against his chest. Suddenly she stirred, fought herself free, and stared up into eyes that pierced her very soul.

"I'm sorry," she stammered in scarcely more than a whisper. "For a minute I seemed all gone. I'm ashamed of myself —I—" Cheeks afire, she turned and stumbled uncertainly into the ranch-house.

Dan Bartel watched the Box L men drag the groaning Ace Dekker to the porch and prop him up against a post. He walked over and looked down at the gambler. Agony twisted the man's face, but relentless hate shone in his eyes. Blood trickled from a bullet wound in his leg. Both hands were smashed by bullets.

"Reckon the Tamale Kid started somethin' when he figured to clean the slate," Bartel said quietly. "Dekker, yuh've come to the end of the trail."

The gambler shifted painfully, glared up at the red-haired nemesis, a question in his eyes. "Wh-who are yuh? Y-yuh devil. Sam Calhoun never had no son. He never—"

"Reckon Margaret Calhoun had a brother—my dad," said Bartel. "My Aunt Margaret's dead, but before she went out, she mentioned your name. I thought I'd come down an' look yuh over, Ace Dekker!"

A dozen riders poured into the ranch yard then. As they dismounted, they glimpsed the dead men spotting the turf. Two of them walked fast to where Bartel and the Box L punchers were grouped. One was Jim Bridgeman, the other the sheriff of Clune City.

"Well, if it ain't the redheaded coyote," exclaimed the sheriff. "Got here in time, didn't yuh?' he thrust at a Box L man. The puncher grinned.

"Hold yore horses, sheriff," he said. "Reckon yuh're lookin' at the cuss who has just about ruined every badman in the county. We got Klug up at Wolftooth River. Or mebbe I should say Red Bartel did. The rest of the boys are herdin'

what's left of his gang to some cottonwoods, I figger. Here's the brains of the gang, sheriff." He waved his arm toward Ace Dekker.

Jim Bridgeman sucked in his breath as he looked down at the gambler. The sheriff whipped off his hat and scratched a grizzled head.

"Ace Dekker! Well, I'm a son—"

The girl came out of the house, ran sobbing to her father.

"Dekker—and Serle came—they shot the cook and Griggs. I locked the door against them, held 'em off with a rifle until—he—Dan Bartel—came. He saved me, Dad. He's not a badman. H-he's fine and—"

DAN BARTEL heard and his heart filled with joy such as he had never known. A hand fell to his shoulder and he turned to look into a grinning, freckled face. It was Phil Bridgeman.

"Yuh hell-tootin' cuss," exclaimed the youngster. "I never go wrong on a gent."

"Reckon there's a lot of explainin' tuh be done," said Jim Bridgeman. "Let's go inside, sheriff. Better git somebody tuh start patchin' up Dekker or he'll cheat the rope."

Inside, the sheriff stabbed a finger at Dan Bartel. "Start talkin'," he said gruffly.

The Bridgemans were huddled together, their eyes fixed on the redheaded newcomer to the county. The girl had no eyes for anyone else present. Suddenly she jumped up.

"Why, he's hurt," she cried. "His shoulder—it's bleeding."

The sheriff growled impatiently. Bartel grinned.

"I plumb forgot it, Nan—er—Miss Bridgeman. Would yuh be so kind as tuh get that envelope I left with yuh?"

The girl nodded and left the room.

"It'll tell more than I can," said the nephew of Margaret Calhoun. "It's a confession from a gent who forged a paper for Ace Dekker ten years back. He robbed Sam Calhoun of the Three Sevens by hirin' a clever cuss tuh fake his writin'. Calhoun never signed over his ranch legal."

The Bridgemans, father and son, faced one another. The older man mumbled something, then fixed his gaze upon Bartel again.

"I happened tuh meet up with the Tamale Kid on a trail to the south. He was bad hurt. Yuh'll recall I asked yuh about him, sheriff? I took him tuh a padre an' he wrote this out. Reckon I convinced the padre I knew Margaret Calhoun—" He paused as Nan came in. She carried a pan of steaming water in one hand and the envelope in the other.

"I'm goin' to look at that wound," she said with authority to Dan as she handed him the envelope.

The redheaded outlaw buster felt a rush of joy through his veins as he grinned back at her. "Yes, ma'am," he said obediently.

"That's why Dekker set Serle on me in the saloon in Clune City," he went on, turning to the others. The girl ripped the shirt at his shoulder and began her ministrations. "I told him I had a message for Margaret Calhoun from the Tamale Kid. That's why Dekker sent yuh tuh bring me in, sheriff. And then Serle rode out tuh get Klug an' his gang tuh spring me. I reckon that confession led me right into the thick of your problem, too, Bridgeman.

"The sheepmen weren't drivin' the woollies into the cattle-grazing lands. It was Klug's and Serle's gang, and Dekker was the big hombre behind it all. Bridgeman was making a good thing out of this ranch. He sold it tuh yuh, Bridgeman, after he stole it from Sam Calhoun.

"Then he started in breakin' you. He'd get it back again an' make another big profit, besides the haul he got on your stolen cattle. I heard them planning this last big play out in the hideout. They took me out there tuh get that paper that would ruin Dekker, but they found out after they worked on me that I left it somewheres, and they decided it must be here.

"So while Klug and his riders drove them sheep into the Basin and rode up

tuh rustle a thousand head of stock, Dekker and Serle cut back here, knowin' that all the punchers would be in the Basin clearin' the sheep out."

Dan paused and grimaced slightly as the girl dabbed at his wound. He looked directly into her eyes. Nan lowered her head but the redhead of the moment had caught the telltale flush in her cheek.

A Box L man spoke. "Klug talked just before he cashed in. I reckon what he said clears Bartel. The boys'll back me up."

"I don't blame yuh none," Dan said to Jim Bridgeman. "My tale about how I got tied up with Klug would've been pretty thin. I didn't want tuh spill anythin' until I had Dekker tuh rights. Yuh see I'm Margaret Calhoun's nephew, and I reckon the Three Sevens belongs tuh me legal."

Nan Bridgeman uttered a little cry and the pan of water spilled over Dan's head. The redhead howled. The sheriff snickered but Jim Bridgeman's face showed no sign of mirth.

"Then I got tuh clear out," he said, the lines of his face deepening perceptibly. "Don't seem right somehow after workin' an' slavin' for years for me an' Phil an' Nan."

The girl stood up straight, eyes flashing. "It isn't," she declared. "Dad, we'll fight!"

A smile came to Dan Bartel's face as he rose and met Jim Bridgeman's defiant gaze. "Dekker'll have tuh make that purchase price good, Bridgeman. Then when yuh get it, I'd kind of like tuh have yuh buy a half interest from me. I reckon I wouldn't know the first way tuh turn with a ranch like this on my hands. Yuh see, I've got tuh have a pardner who has brains." He shifted his gray eyes to Nan. "I kind of think I'm goin' tuh like it here."

Phil Bridgeman's chuckle was disturbing.

His sister's dark eyes were turned on Dan Bartel, however. Deep in the twin dark pools that mirrored her thoughts, the redhead caught a sparkle that nearly wrung a wild shout of exultation from his throat.

The sheriff cut in. "Reckon we'll clear out," he said, "an' move what's left of Ace Dekker tuh Clune City." Spurs jingled as the room emptied.

Jim Bridgeman held out his hand to the rightful owner of the Three Sevens. "We're pardners right now," he said gratefully. "Mebbe some day—" He paused to shoot a glance in Nan's direction. Then a brief grin punctuated the sentence. He went out, shoving Phil Bridgeman ahead of him.

Dan Bartel fidgeted as Nan held out her hand. As his fingers closed over it, he tried to speak. The girl waited, her red lips trembling on a mischievous smile.

She said: "Your grip is strong, Dan, but I'd like to be able to use my hand again."

"Oh, I—I'm sorry," the redhead blurted out. "I—I—er—"

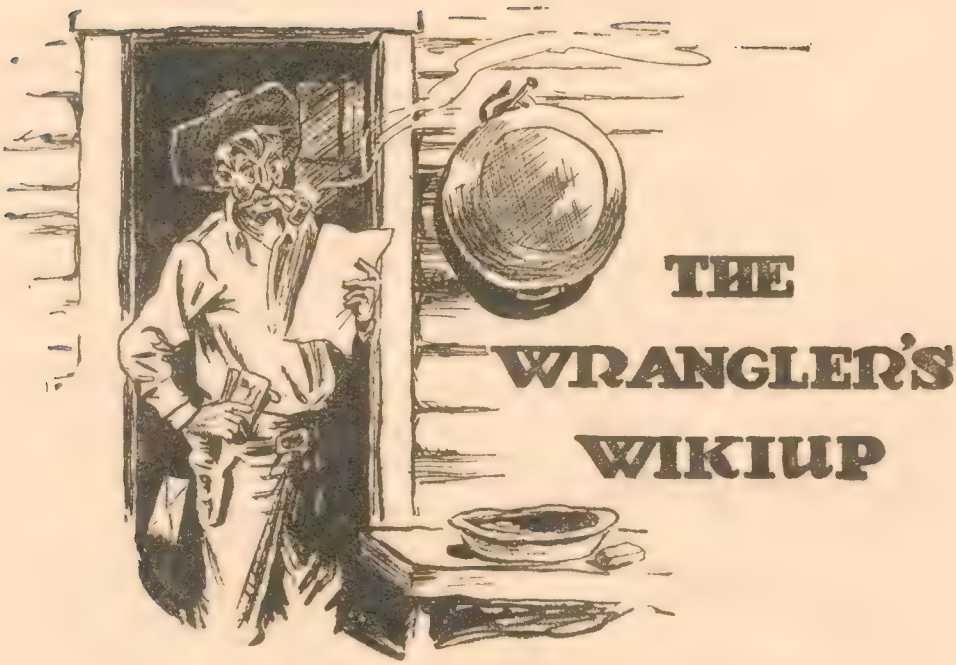
Nan moved away. "I'm glad," she whispered.

Next *Month*

SEÑORITA DEATH

Gripping "Kid Calvert" Novel

By PHIL RICHARDS



Drop in an' tongue fan with Socrates Hicks

EVENIN', ladies and gents! Yuh see this bag of letters I got under my arm, huh? Looks like the old wikiup is gettin' plumb famous and them folks that know good readin' ain't passin' up WESTERN ACES, nope. Before we git palaverin' about anythin' else, I wants tuh answer the lady over by the stove. She says as how she got a letter from a tenderfoot away 'cross the Mississippi sayin' the range is plumb hard on womenfolks and cattle and she don't think we are stickin' tuh the truth about them gals we write about bein' good lookers and havin' robust constitutions.

Now in the old days the beauty and bloom shore did fade from the gals' faces long before their youth had pilgrimed. They was blazin' the trails, sabe? They lived in white-topped covered wagons, in log huts chinked with moss, in sod and 'dobe huts. They never complained. Hardship an' poverty never got the best of 'em. They sacrificed their looks so that the West of tuhday could be what 'tis. They got comfortable ranch-houses now an' hombres tuh do the hard work. Of course, there's a few exceptions but by crippity when I was in Chicawgo once personal conductin' some cows tuh the stockyard for the Ol' Bar S, I seen city hombresses that shore had been mistreated an' not by Ma Nature, neither. I just want some of them tenderfeet tuh come hyar some time an' see some of the range beauties, yep. They got complexions that don't come in tin cans, yep.

But they ain't all doubtin' Toms. Nope. Now all yuh listen.

Shorty told me this letter hyar needed attention first. He told me the cuss is thinkin' of goin' Mex. Listen tuh what he says about our magazine, though. Reckon he'll allus be a gringo tuh me whether he drinks mescal or not—waal, he says—

307 W. Main St.,
Crawfordsville, Ind.

DEAR SOCRATES HICKS:

Having just finished reading the December issue of your WESTERN ACES, I was told there was just one issue before it. If all the stories in the first were as good as they are in this one I have now, I sure missed some good reading.

Being interested in the West and liking to ride I want you to tell me the difference between a stock saddle and a Mexican saddle. Also where you can, if at all, buy a Mexican saddle and how much would one cost approximately?

You're off to a good start with some mighty fine stories. Just keep it up and you've got a regular reader.

Give us some more stories like "Outlaw's Nemesis" and "Hell's Hombre." Boy, they make you sit on the edge of your chair!

Well, so long, Socrates, and good luck. Don't forget to tell me all about the saddles just as soon as you can. I'll be readin' you.

MALCOLM AIKMAN.

Glad yuh asked me about them saddles, Malc. The stock saddle is really a sit-on saddle while a Mex is a sit-in. By that we mean this, Malc. Every saddle has a pommel and cantle but in the Mex saddle the pommel is plumb high up and padded and the cantle is round-headed and projecting and the rider seems tuh sit right in the saddle instead of on it. Some still have the heavy knee rolls that are discarded by most stock saddlers. The cowpokes use a heavy stock saddle that ain't far from unlike the Mex saddle. Mex saddles are plumb fancy with embossed leather and silver ornaments. Malc, a Mex saddle is pretty near the same as them used by them Arabs in far-off Africa. The Spanish got the idea from 'em, then the Spaniards come tuh Mexico so yuh see the reason them Mexes use that type of saddle, huh? I don't know where yuh could buy a real Mex saddle unless it was down below the border an' called personal at them haciendas. I don't think there's many bein' used in the southwest tuhday. I'll look intuh it further though an' let yuh know. Glad yuh're stringin' with the WESTERN ACES outfit. Adios, an' keep sendin' in them slips.

One gent says he likes the color an' romance we git in the stories. Says the names of towns an' arroyos an' canyons an' such like shore smack of the wilds. Waal, I says that they know how tuh pick names in the West. Just run yore tongues over these an' tell me if they don't roll off said tongues like music—Rogue River, Powder River, Big Teton, Jackson's Hole, Cripple Creek, Rawhide Butte, Tin Cup an' Hell's High Pocket. They're real places out hyar, too.

They shore are challenges tuh the romancers, yep. Just sing out 'bout the freedom of the hills that nudge the sky, an' the plains that reach tuh sundown. A gent with a lot of book learnin' dropped intuh my wikiup once an' says tuh me: "Mr. Hicks, I reckon when yuh put an hombre right back intuh the lap of Mother Nature, he jus' natchelly descends tuh the lowes' depths of the savage. He mos' likely would lost heart an' soul, an' become a brute."

Ladies an' gents, I don't blame yuh fer laughin'. He shore was wrong. Put a gent out in the open where he can see hisself fed the fust time an' look intuh his unquiet soul, an' yuh'll make a better man of him. He'll hear Maw Nature whisperin' all around him. The shift of the desert sand, the drop of pebbles from a cliff, the brushin' of the wind against the sage. That's God's voice, gents!

When yuh git near enough tuh hear it, I reckon yuh'll feel yoreself gittin' kind of magnified. The gents on the owl-hoot trails hear him a lot. It does 'em more good than yuh think, too. Reckon I feel a song comin' on an' she's an old one, ladies an' gents, so let's all join in, when yuh git the hang of it.

Brady, Brady, don't yuh know yuh done wrong
To come intuh the saloon when the game was goin' on?
I told yuh a dozen times before,
An' now yuh lay dead on my barroom floor.

Brady, Brady, won't come no more!
Brady, Brady, won't come no more!
Nope, Brady won't come no more!
For Wild Bill shot him with a forty-four!

Brady went tuh hell lookin' mighty bol'.
The devil says, "Where yuh from, from Jackson's Hole?
Waal, pull off yore coat an' step this way,
For I been expectin' yuh every day!"

Now le's all join the chorus. Shorty, plunk the gee-tar. All tuhgether now—

Brady, Brady, where are yuh at?
Brady, Brady, where are yuh at?
Brady, Brady, where are yuh at?
Struttin' in hell with your Stetson hat!

There's more verses, but I reckon we ain't got time tuh sing all night. We got palaver about the stories we been handin' out. I reckon Gene Dutcher's yarn, "The Wolf Rider," is goin' tuh git a lot uh votes. That gent, Tom Zanz, shore roped Genie at the end, and I bet you hombresses hyar that ain't been hitched are still thinkin' about it.

Cheer up, there's some big, han'some riders lookin' fer gals like yuh. Just as big an' brave as Zanz. All gents wa'n't made as ornery lookin' as Shorty hyar, nope. Yep, that December spread shore lived up tuh its name—ACES! I let a hull batch of biskits burn reading "Hell's Hombre" tuh fin' out why a gent that was plumb honest would rob a bank. Yuh find out fer yoreself as I don't like tuh give the snap away.

I AIN'T got time tuh tell a story tuhnight, but I got some words of wisdom tuh hand yuh. Got 'em from the Hermit of the Ghost Hills, when I was holed up with him once in a blizzard. He says it's all right tuh git drunk with a stranger if yuh only let him git drunk fust.

It's funny how some folks like tuh talk, for it's shore the one thing they won't do when yuh try tuh make 'em.

A gent who knows enough tuh hol' his tongue could drygulch the King of Egypt, an' no sheriff'd ever find out about it.

Reckon I got tuh git down tuh official business like them letters I was tellin' yuh about. Hyar's a snake-tongued jasper from the effete East who ain't got no respeck fer me or Shorty, but who likes what we dish out, anyways.

South Freeport, Maine.

H'lo, Hicks, yuh ol' busted down cowpoke, I picked up a copy of WESTERN ACES to read when I was waitin' for a stage to take me to Boston. When I tore myself away from the darned book, three stages had already left. I had to camp out on the stone floor of the Junction stop until morning. I didn't mind until I got a look at your war map and then I got mad.

The jasper who was with me said he didn't believe an old crow-bitten-lookin' cuss like you wrote them things under your picture. I says it was most likely one of the ghosts that some gents hire to do all the work, as only a ghost could stand being in the same wikiup with you.

But the stories were aces like you say on the cover, and it ain't the writin' fellows' fault that you look like the deuce. Reckon I'll be readin' WESTERN ACES from now on, anyway. I can always tear your picture out before I start readin'. Adios,

FRED HUBBARD.

Smart Aleck, huh? Waal, Fred, so yuh're the gent they named a squash after, huh? Haw-w-w-w! But yuh liked WESTERN ACES an' that's yore ticket tuh health fer a long time yet. But don't get me riled too much, yuh ornery varmint. Let's hyar from yuh again if yuh don't git pizened by them beans yuh eat.

Guess that's all for now, folks. Don't forget this voting slip.

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